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Address to the New England Board of Higher Education

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Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

Address to the New England Board of Higher Education conference on university/community partnerships

March 31, 2000

I have been asked to speak about higher education's responsibility to the community. Since academic institutions relate to multiple communities, and since the word "community" is subject to varying definitions, there are many directions in which to take this subject. For the purposes of today's conference, however, our proper focus is on the physical community of a college or university, both the immediate neighborhoods surrounding a campus and, more broadly, the city, town, or region in which a campus is located.

Although this focus leaves out a great many important questions about the social responsibilities of universities, it directs us to some of the most complex and potentially troublesome questions of our social existence as institutions: What, if anything, do we owe our immediate communities? What principles might guide our thinking about our relationships with our neighbors and hosts? What problems command our attention as we think about these relationships? What forms might our interactions with our communities most usefully take? And, looking beyond matters of obligation to the potential for benefit, what might academic institutions gain from these interactions?

I am aware that as I speak to this audience I am addressing individuals whose credentials on the subject at hand are at least as strong as my own. Today's panel sessions include representatives of several institutions that have splendid records of community-oriented activities. In addition to this morning's gathering, New England institutions as diverse as Yale, Clark, Trinity, Harvard, UMass, UConn, and Connecticut College are mentioned in the popular press and acknowledged in academic and government circles for their notable records of community engagement.

So I want to make clear at the outset that although I am pleased to count myself and my university as members of this fellowship of commitment, I make no claim to either special insight or special accomplishment in working with the local community. I

contend only to be someone who has cared about these issues for many years, one of many working to assure that academic institutions make their maximum contribution to society in general as well as the communities in which they are located.

Having wrestled with this morning's topic for more than three decades, I am struck that much of the current discussion, especially in the popular press, is premised on the notion that something fundamentally new is going on—as if higher education had just discovered the appropriateness of paying attention to local communities and expending institutional energies on interactions with neighbors. A recent Washington Post feature article proclaimed, "Colleges are embracing towns they once held at arms length," and the Economist has observed, "things appear to be changing. Across the United States, colleges and universities have decided it may be in their interests to try to do something for the people just beyond their classrooms." Such comments accurately describe changed attitudes—and changed realities—at a few institutions, but they miss the larger point: There is a proud tradition of urban engagement by American colleges and universities, stretching back to at least the late nineteenth century, when cities became the centers of American life and the first truly urban universities were created.

My own institution was founded in 1898, with the explicit mission of attending to the needs of Boston residents, especially the new communities of immigrants and industrial workers. During the second and third decades of the twentieth century, Boston University was one of a number of academic institutions that defined themselves as "municipal universities" committed to serving local needs. In the 1960s, as Massachusetts was creating its first public urban university, UMass/Boston, the phenomenon of urban engagement by colleges and universities became so broad and significant that the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, one of the most important study groups ever to survey the workings of academia, devoted an entire volume to the subject, citing case studies from all over the country.

So in discussing higher education's responsibilities to neighboring communities we are hardly entering virgin territory. Rather, we are challenged to interpret a venerable tradition in ways appropriate for current conditions. And this is challenge enough, for conditions have altered significantly since the last great burst of creativity in university–community interactions during the 1960s.

Perhaps the most dramatic change is the decrease in government money available to support these initiatives. In the 1960s, academic involvement in urban problem-solving was often prompted by federal grant programs, such as those focused on Model Cities, urban renewal, Title I, and community health centers. Today, we are frequently called upon by government and community leaders to commit core institutional resources to these kinds of efforts, a development that shifts the

terms of discussion considerably.

Attitudes have also changed. In the 1960s, outreach efforts often presumed that academic experts knew best how to fix deteriorated urban centers, that problems would disappear once the posse from the Joint Center for Urban Studies arrived. Today, we are more respectful of both the complexities of these problems and the communities with which we work. In the contemporary world, moreover, constructive interactions between universities and communities must be genuine partnerships, in which each side understands that the other knows important things and that each can benefit from the interaction. Forming such partnerships is perhaps easier today than it was thirty-five years ago. The instant hostility that frequently flared between institutions and host communities in the 1960s has been replaced by a more pragmatic readiness to do business if an honest relationship can be established.

Finally, I believe our heightened consciousness of the importance of fostering diversity within our campuses has created new bonds between academia and surrounding communities, and more possibilities for constructive interaction than existed four decades ago.

So present conditions pose some new challenges but also offer new opportunities. And the need for action persists. Indeed, as the economic divide between the haves and have-nots widens in all our metropolitan areas, and as the particular circumstances of Yale in New Haven or Trinity in Hartford make dramatically clear, the need for effective interaction between colleges and host communities is greater today than ever. Unless we can make progress, the social powder keg that exists in many of our urban centers may explode again with greatly increased force; and unless we can find ways to work effectively with local communities, some important academic institutions may not survive in anything like their historic form.

Against the backdrop of this country's proud tradition of urban higher education and the challenge of reinterpreting that tradition to meet current needs, let us turn to the task of defining in contemporary terms a university's responsibilities to its surrounding community. This topic is best approached by dividing it into two broad issues. First, what obligations are inherent in the nature of academic institutions and therefore applicable to all colleges and universities? Second, what variations among colleges and universities should be considered in determining how different campuses should think about their community relationships?

Let me speak first about two responsibilities that seem universal. The first has to do with our physical, corporate presence in our host communities. The second has to do with our nature as academic institutions.

Virtually all colleges and universities occupy space and utilize public resources. We take up land, which we occupy without the legal obligation to pay taxes, that might be used for other purposes. Most of us, moreover, are looking for additional space, frequently in densely settled areas, in communities that can scarcely afford to lose tax revenues. We all also need services—police and fire services, for example—that are provided to us at considerable expense to our communities. And we all have an effect on the quality of life of those who share communities with us. We create traffic. We bring in large numbers of students. We affect the nature of commercial and residential activity.

I would argue, of course, that many of these effects are positive, sometimes even the stuff of economic life to the communities where we reside. In fact, a close accounting might well support the argument that the financial benefits a college or university brings to a community outweighs any costs their presence entails. That said, we would be well advised not to assert that the economic benefits we bring free us from the obligation to address directly the costs that our presence imposes on communities. To do so would not only guarantee antagonistic relationships with host governments and neighborhoods but, in many cases, would be particularly unseemly, given the resources at our command in relation to the needs of the communities around us.

Many institutions—rightly, in my view—have agreed to some form of direct compensation to cities for removing land from the tax rolls. Northeastern's policy is to compensate the city with payment in lieu of taxes for any tax-producing land that we acquire. Beyond such payments, many institutions—again rightly, in my view—accept an obligation to make their facilities available to the community. At Northeastern, we do a host of things, from providing daily passes to our fitness center, to providing money and university space to community groups, to serving turkey dinners to the elderly on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Well-conceived combinations of direct payment and access to university resources go a long way toward convincing a host community that a university is indeed a good neighbor.

Before leaving the topic of responsibilities arising from our corporate presence in cities, let me focus on two areas of concern that seem particularly worthy of attention. The first involves student behavior. We share our neighborhoods with residents attempting to lead normal lives. We know that student exuberance can spill over into behaviors that are detrimental to the tranquillity and sometimes also the safety of the community. We need to make clear to our students through education and disciplinary procedures that we intend to protect our neighbors from excessive noise and disruption, not to mention physical danger or serious social evils, like drug and alcohol abuse.

One of the things I am proudest of at Northeastern is the positive relationship we enjoy with our community that result from our

sustained commitment to policing student behavior in the neighborhood. I should add this: We view our efforts in this area as part of the kind of education we seek to offer. That education, especially because of our emphasis on work, is more linked to adult life and responsibilities than is the traditional undergraduate experience. We think of learning to live in an urban community, as opposed to enjoying an extended childhood behind academic walls, as a major part of education for adulthood.

A second issue that merits particular attention, especially in today's Boston, involves the impact of students on the local housing market. When affordable housing is in short supply and universities do not provide sufficient beds to accommodate their enrollments, students compete with residents for scarce apartments, driving up rents and inevitably displacing families. In this context, I regard Mayor Tom Menino's call for universities to house more students on campus as entirely appropriate, and I am pleased to see so many Boston-area institutions responding positively to the mayor's exhortations.

I am particularly proud of the agreement that Northeastern reached with the city and the Lower Roxbury community, through which we agreed to subsidize the construction of 75 units of affordable housing as part of a transaction that allows us to build dormitory space for 600 students on previously vacant city land. That is the kind of agreement in which everyone—university, community, city—wins, representing just the kind of partnership called for by contemporary conditions.

I suspect few in this audience would disagree that academic institutions should be good citizens of their communities in the manner I have just described. I also suspect that most of you would argue that the arrangements I have outlined are as applicable to non-academic tax-exempt institutions like hospitals, churches, and museums as they are to colleges and universities. Let me turn, then, to a somewhat less obvious dimension of the issue and offer an opinion about a particular community responsibility implied by the nature of our work.

We are educational institutions. Whatever else we do, whatever else we stand for, we are providers of educational services, and we are custodians for our fellow citizens of the value of education to the well-being of society. So the question arises: Do we have a special responsibility to pay attention to what is happening in the schools of our communities, to make our presence felt and our voices heard on matters that affect education?

I believe we do have such an obligation. For a college or university to go about its business, indifferent to the quality of education occurring in its surrounding community, seems to me a bit like a metropolitan hospital providing health care to affluent, suburban patients while the residents of its immediate community suffer injury and disease unattended. Our calling as

educators compels us to care about education in our communities and help, where we reasonably can, to assure that the opportunity to learn, which we rightly hold dear, is made available to young residents of our neighborhoods. I would assert such an obligation under almost any historical or social circumstances, but the case for engagement with these issues seems particularly compelling today as elementary and secondary schools struggle through one of the most challenging periods in their modern history.

There are many ways for us to carry out our obligation to local schools, of course, from providing scholarships to community residents, to working directly with teachers and principals, to creating special enrichment programs that expose young people to the possibilities of the university, to working with local authorities to craft education policies.

At Northeastern, because we regard our work with the schools as our first and most important responsibility to our urban neighbors, we maintain a rich array of programs designed to contribute to the quality of schooling in Boston, including our immediate community. Among many other things, we provide space to a special high school focused on health careers, work actively with a cluster of local schools wherever our expertise can assist them, support a research and service center that works with science and math teachers to develop curricular materials, and partner with Roxbury Community College to make sure that area residents have a ladder of educational opportunity before them.

Although our particular mix of programs would not make sense for other colleges and universities, I would argue all our institutions have a responsibility to get engaged in an appropriate way, committing resources to address the nation's single greatest current domestic challenge. I would add, in this context, that I believe academic leaders have a responsibility to make their voices heard on critical questions of the day related to education. I believe, for example, that college presidents in Massachusetts should participate actively in public discussions about education reform, especially the proposed high-stakes testing program, as well as other difficult matters like mandatory tests for teachers.

In addition to drawing attention to our inherent responsibilities to our communities, a thoughtful consideration of our special character and values as educational institutions assists us in thinking about what we should not do as we attempt to help our neighbors.

This is an arena where we need to remember history. I referred earlier to the experience of the late 1960s, when colleges and universities were drawn into an unprecedented level of community involvement, responding to their own impulse to do something constructive about the urban and racial crises of those

years and also to the urgings of a wide variety of constituencies, from students, to community residents, to political leaders, to foundations. Inevitably, some of these well-intentioned efforts proved controversial and politically charged, and more than a few of the explosions that occurred on American campuses in the '60s were linked to these kinds of activities.

In the wake of the crises of the student-protest era, many thoughtful educators were struck by the fuzziness of academia's thinking about what we should and should not do as universities. A special presidential commission on campus unrest concluded that a key cause of the crisis was the failure of academic institutions to give priority and meaning to their central purposes of education and scholarship. As the commission's report put it: "The university's core functions—teaching and research—have suffered as increasing involvement in peripheral service activities has drained vital resources from them and compromised the university's commitment to them."

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, reviewing the wreckage of those years, arrived at a similar conclusion and offered general guidelines to academic leaders regarding community involvement. "The campus is primarily an academic institution," the commission asserted.

We consider it a contradiction when the campus takes on functions that are at odds with the inherent nature of academic life. We also consider it inefficient when an academic institution takes on non-academic operations that can be performed as well or better by other institutions. We propose two tests: (1) is the activity, even if largely academic in method or content, compatible with the mores of academic life? And (2) is the activity, if not academic in method or content, better done by the campus than by any other alternate agency? If the answer is "no" in specific cases to either question, we believe there is a prima facie case for disengagement.

These are wise words, rooted in a troubled stretch of academia's modern history that we would do well to remember as we embark on a new era of urban engagement.

So, to summarize the responsibilities to the community that are universally applicable to all colleges and universities, I would argue that three general principles commend themselves to our attention. First, we all have the obligation to be good corporate citizens, to assure that our presence in our host communities brings positive benefits and that potentially negative consequences are minimized. Second, we have a special responsibility as academics to pay attention to the quality of education in the schools of our host communities and to address public policy issues that affect the schools. And third, in considering our responsibilities to our communities, we should think about the things we should do and the things we should not do. We should remember that we are academic institutions first

and foremost, that our first obligation is to assure the well-being of our particular college or university and of higher education more broadly, and that acceptance of ill-considered or inappropriate community-oriented activities can not only lead to failure but have negative consequences for our own institutions and all academia.

I spoke earlier of a second dimension of the discussion about our community responsibility, this one arising not from the common characteristics of all colleges and universities but the special qualities of particular institutions. My thoughts on this part of today's topic proceed from the view that the single most important quality of higher education in this country is the variety of institutional types and educational offerings that we make available to the public.

Nowhere in the United States is this institutional diversity more evident than in New England. We are blessed with a dazzling array of research universities and teaching colleges, sectarian and secular schools, urban and rural campuses, public and private institutions, general-purpose and special-purpose institutions, community colleges and junior colleges, with the aggregate devoted to every conceivable kind of education and scholarship, and many individual universities possessing genuine claims to distinctiveness in purpose and approach.

One of our central responsibilities as academic leaders, in my view, is to preserve and foster this diversity by protecting the distinctiveness of our own institutions and paying attention to our particular missions and characteristics as we craft our relationships with external communities. There are activities that make sense for an urban university that would not make sense for a nationally oriented research university; activities that are appropriate for a community college but not an elite liberal arts institution.

In a context where competitive forces within higher education sometimes push our institutions toward a single set of values and functions, we have a responsibility to assert our institutional individuality and make it an asset in our interactions with external communities. Here, once again, the Carnegie Commission of the 1970s provided wisdom worth remembering. The commission spoke of two values as particularly important in assuring the well being of academic institutions.

The first was "complementarity," a term the commission used to refer to the relationship among activities and functions for which an institution assumes responsibility. It was the Carnegie Commission's view that institutions are best served by taking on functions that are complementary to each other, so that they do not create antagonistic, mutually unsympathetic subcultures and factions that foster institutional conflict and instability.

The second value the commission asserted was "cohesion." By stressing this value, the commission argued that nothing should be added to the functions of an institution that does not make a contribution to the whole enterprise, that academic leaders should ask themselves how the institution's various functions fit together and reinforce each other as a test of whether their institution is a cohesive, internally reinforcing enterprise.

The principles of complementarity and cohesion are useful in thinking about the implications of distinctive institutional personas regarding our involvement with communities. I would argue that the most effective forms of engagement are those that meet these two tests. In addition, these forms of engagement are most likely to return rewards to the institution and therefore most likely to endure.

To illustrate my meaning here, let me compare my own university with another local institution located somewhat upstream and across the river from the Northeastern "yard" on Huntington Avenue. Harvard is, of course, one of the greatest universities in this country and, indeed, of the world, and if any institution in New England represents the pinnacle of scholarly achievement, elite social status, and national and international perspective, it is Harvard. Northeastern, founded as an offshoot of the YMCA to serve the needs of immigrants and workers, has a somewhat different history and has evolved along another path altogether. So it may be useful to think about how Northeastern's approach to its community responsibilities compares with Harvard's.

To this end, I consulted former Harvard president Derek Bok's thoughtful book on the social obligations of academia, called *Beyond the Ivory Tower*. In a chapter on the university and the local community, Bok addresses the questions on which this conference is focused, and, as always, he has interesting and worthwhile things to say. He acknowledges, for example, that Harvard has the obligations of corporate citizenship I discussed a few moments ago, including both payments in lieu of taxes and access for community residents to Harvard's numerous museums, libraries, and athletic facilities.

Bok also encourages valuable community contributions from student volunteers and publicly spirited faculty members. Further, he endorses modest projects, like helping neighborhood residents design a park, which, in his words, "give pleasure to others at so little cost to the university," and other initiatives that serve the interest of both university and community, like having student instructors do practice teaching in the public schools. He even endorses investments of university resources in projects to reverse urban deterioration as good for both university and community.

But Bok also argues that academic institutions do not have any special responsibilities to their communities that other kinds of

institutions do not possess and, referring to the same history that informed the Carnegie Commission report, warns strongly against involvement in research projects and consultative efforts designed to help city governments or urban communities address urgent social issues. Such commitments, he notes, take faculty members far afield from their true areas of expertise and run the risk of involving them and their institution in the kind of political crossfire that led to both the failures and the explosions of the 1960s.

President Bok's thoughts about the proper relationship between a university and a host urban community seem to me an excellent example of the principles of complementarity and cohesion that the Carnegie Commission asserted. He is mindful of some special obligations arising from Harvard's place in its community, and he is thoughtfully attentive to Harvard's essential nature as an academic institution.

Northeastern presents a very different case, with different traditions and, I would argue, different responsibilities. We are, of course, an urban university. We have taken our life from our presence in the city and always defined our purposes in relation to the city's evolving needs. Our spiritual roots lie closer to the American land grant tradition of education and research in public service that produced our great public universities than to the European tradition of grooming scholarly and social elites that gave rise to Harvard.

Northeastern can hardly take the position that the city is an alien place with which we are ill equipped to engage. Our tradition, indeed, is all about engagement, all about reaching out to the community and seeking ways to be a constructive presence there. Our special character attracts both students and faculty for whom connecting with urban life is a value, and we therefore perceive great benefit to ourselves, both in the education of our students and in the work of our faculty, in building a network of relationships with our urban neighbors. In our case, I would argue, the principles of complementarity and cohesion lead to quite different conclusions than those appropriate for Harvard.

A second defining characteristic of Northeastern has been our commitment to professional education at the undergraduate level, including, of course, our signature program of cooperative education. This means that we value our students' abilities as doers as much as their potential as thinkers and we seek opportunities for our students to develop their capacities to be effective in the world, through jobs, through internships, through volunteer activities.

We ask our faculty to help students make use of these real-world and workplace experiences in their classrooms, so we need faculty members who themselves have some familiarity with the world beyond the university for which students are preparing. We encourage our professors to get involved with employers and city

agencies, to contribute their expertise and familiarize themselves with the operations of these non-academic institutions, and so to enhance their ability to do the kind of teaching in which we specialize.

Indeed, we create specific units of Northeastern, such as the Center for Family Business in the College of Business Administration, the Community Health Education, Research, and Service program in our Bouvé College of Health Sciences, or the Center for Law and Urban Policy in the Law School, that are designed to get students and faculty into community settings, both to provide important services and to enhance their own learning and development.

Our new School of Education, which held its inaugural convocation this morning, is a further example. Housed within our College of Arts and Sciences, it will focus on preparing students for careers in urban schools. For many institutions, the creation of a program of teacher training focused on urban schools, with a faculty drawn from the arts and sciences, would be anomalous to say the least. Once again, in our case it is a natural extension of who we are.

I hope I am not misunderstood here. I am not making an invidious comparison between an urban-engaged Northeastern and a more reserved Harvard in order to embarrass a sister institution before an audience likely to be sympathetic to my side of the story. I regard Harvard as a national treasure, and I agree with President Bok's arguments about what is appropriate for his university. My point here is to stress the importance of an institution's finding ways to connect with its surrounding community that make sense given its character and history and commitments. I encourage all our institutions to think carefully about who they are and what they do best, and what kind of interactions with the community will best reinforce their own educational and scholarly purposes, before getting committed to significant outreach efforts. This kind of careful thinking will go a long way toward preserving the well-being of our colleges and universities, and reinforcing the diversity among them, while creating relationships with our communities that have a chance of enduring.

So the topic of academia's responsibilities to the community leads in many directions, some common to all our institutions, some particular to each of us. Beyond all this, however, I think we need to be attentive to one more educational value that may help us make decisions in this arena, a value I touched on briefly a few moments ago, but one that deserves special emphasis at the end of my remarks. Education in this country is about social justice. Education is the greatest device the human imagination has ever conceived to equalize opportunities among people regardless of their original circumstances. So we cannot be indifferent to disparities and economic inequities that we find in the society around us.

As it happens, many colleges and universities, some of them extraordinarily wealthy, find themselves sharing the same patch of planet with communities that include residents living in extraordinarily impoverished conditions, with depressingly bleak futures. Just as this country could not survive in the nineteenth century half-slave and half-free, so too it cannot survive in the twenty-first century half-rich and half-poor. Educational institutions with substantial resources need to consider what they can do about social inequalities in the community where they reside. Colleges and universities that aspire to prepare the next generation of community leaders need to project values of civic consciousness and human sympathy that will inspire the lives of those we teach.

Such considerations may prompt us to reach out to our urban neighbors a bit more energetically, a bit more generously, and a bit more determinedly than we might otherwise do. Such extra efforts would not, I think, be inconsistent with our commitments as educators.

Thank you very much.