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Inaugural address

Richard M. Freeland (1941-)
Northeastern University

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Inaugural address January 17, 1997 Matthews Arena

Thank you, Chairman Matthews.

Not only do I accept the presidency of Northeastern, I embrace it. Not only do I succeed to this position, I leap to it. I am not only honored by this appointment, I am exhilarated by it. I wanted this job, and I confess with Shakespeare's King Harry, on this the most important day of my professional life, "if it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive."

I am deeply grateful to the Trustees for offering me this opportunity. You have summoned me to a great task, and I will summon every ounce of energy I possess to lead this university to new greatness.

I am delighted to be joined on the podium today by two former presidents, Kenneth G. Ryder and John A. Curry. I draw inspiration from their example and confidence from the institutional strength that is their legacy.

I greet the leaders of government, business and the professions, especially the members of the platform party who have participated in the program. Your presence honors Northeastern and affirms our contributions to the region as well as the nation.

I extend special appreciation to the Northeastern community--students, faculty, staff, alumni--so ably represented by the speakers we have heard. You have welcomed Elsa and me and our children warmly, and warmly do we join the family.

Finally, let me recognize colleagues and friends from sister institutions across the country. Thank you for helping us celebrate the university that we love. Thank you all. And welcome.

II

As I look out over this assembly, I am reminded of the many-sided splendor of higher education in the United States. Present here are delegates from over two hundred colleges and universities, large and small, urban and rural, specialized and comprehensive, secular and sacred, independent and public--each with its own character, each lodged in a niche of our national culture, each with its particular combination of teaching, research and service.

I know from personal experience the benefits of the institutional diversity represented here. My own schooling occurred in two very different independent institutions, one small college, one major university, and I salute teachers and friends from Amherst College and the University of Pennsylvania, where I learned the power of higher education to transform an individual life. Much of my professional work, however, has occurred in public institutions, and I salute colleagues and friends from the University of Massachusetts at Boston and the City University of New York, who work every day to redeem this country's promise of opportunity for all.

I am aware that this ceremony occurs amid widespread criticism of higher education. In the public sector, financial pressures grow and demands for accountability multiply; in the independent sector, parents and students question escalating costs and institutional priorities. My belief, passionately held and rooted in twenty-five years of study and work, is that

academia does serve the country well, and that the rest of the world is not wrong to envy us our system of advanced education. But we can serve better, and we must contribute more. The times, more eloquently even than our critics, compel us to respond to imperatives of the future and not to be content with patterns of the past.

III

But the past can point the way. This nation's colleges and universities were created in response to social, not academic, imperatives. We have campuses founded to serve religious goals, campuses built to advance economic or professional purposes, campuses meant to be engines of opportunity. Each chapter of the American experience, from the arrival of the first Europeans to the emergence of the United States as a dominant international power, has fostered a new generation of academic institutions geared to the requirements of the times.

Nor have our colleges and universities ever been static. Campuses founded for a particular purpose in one period have taken on new functions in the next, growing larger and more complex along the way, sometimes fundamentally changing. And always, always, we have made the best decisions about change when we thought from the outside in, when we began not with internal goals and our desire to promote them but with society's cares and our responsibility to address them.

IV

Northeastern University has historically responded to particular social needs. To quote our founders: "Northeastern has refused to duplicate...other institutions. It has kept uppermost the question, 'what are the needs of society?' It has not been swayed by the question: 'what are other educational institutions doing?' " as we moved beyond our origins as the Evening Institute of the local YMCA to become the national research university we are today, this distinctiveness remained, which is why President

Clinton praised our class of 1993 for being a "breed apart" and a true "symbol of the American dream."

Over the years, three elements of Northeastern's special character have been paramount. First, we have always been a place of opportunity. We were founded in the Progressive era to educate employed adults and their sons from Boston's growing population of workers and immigrants, and that early commitment to non-traditional students survives today in University College. Over the decades our reach extended--to include women, people of color, international students. For many years providing opportunity meant serving as many students as possible. Today we have reduced our scale and raised our academic sights while still seeking talent from every part of the economic spectrum. When we say Northeastern is "student centered," we mean that helping individuals from all backgrounds realize their full potential is our abiding priority.

A second fundamental part of our identity has been our connection to Boston. Established at a time when academia favored rural settings, Northeastern was created in the city to engage the life of the city. We treasure the cultural riches of our home town, and we treasure the ethnic diversity of our neighborhoods. We work with the schools, with social service agencies, the police and the courts. We work with our neighbors in Roxbury, in the South End and in the Fenway. When we say that we are an urban university, we express our belief that civilization is shaped in metropolitan centers, and we proclaim our commitment to social renewal.

The third essential element of Northeastern--and the genesis of our special genius--has been our connection to the workplace and the world of practice. Drawing inspiration from the tradition of professional education that flowered in the nineteenth century, Northeastern has always prepared students for useful work, first in law, engineering and business, later in health care, criminal justice and computer science. Early on, however, we saw the potential of a second great pedagogical tradition, that of apprenticeship, and we became innovators in cooperative education, ultimately building co-op into our signature program and assuming international leadership in this field. We then

added strength from a third rich tradition, that of liberal learning, by creating our College of Arts and Sciences to offer our students the disciplines that deepen our understanding most fundamentally and stir our souls most profoundly.

Our link to practice has driven our evolution as a scholarly center as well. In the years since World War II, as industry and government have turned to academia for expertise, Northeastern has become an important center of academic research, especially in applied areas such as materials science, drug education, and domestic violence.

So we gather today as a national research university that is student centered, practice oriented, and urban. Now, as we prepare for our centennial, as we consider the diverse goals of our sister institutions, and as we review current social conditions, we must ask ourselves two questions: is an emphasis on practice still appropriate for Northeastern, and is closeness to the workplace compatible with academic excellence and liberal education? The answer to both these questions is an emphatic "yes." Neither our purposes nor the nation's are best served by Northeastern becoming a carbon copy of the great traditional universities that we all so deeply admire.

Colleagues of Northeastern, as a new millennium dawns, this nation is in a period of revolutionary economic change with vast implications for work, the workplace, and individual workers. Today, more than ever, this region and nation need a great university with our particular focus. Our aspiration, building on our traditions, building on our ties to Boston, must be national leadership in education oriented toward practice and scholarship oriented toward technical and social progress. Contemporary conditions beckon us to new achievement. Our capabilities impel us to respond. Our dreams inspire us to reach higher. But this destiny will not be bestowed upon us. We will have to work hard to achieve it. To become a national leader we must re-invent ourselves and redesign our approach to practice-oriented education.

The contemporary economy may seem a surprising basis for advocating academic change. After all, unemployment rates are low. Gross domestic product is up. Incomes are rising. Our nation is reaffirming its position as the world's premier economic power. Why should we not simply continue patterns of education and research now in place?

Thirty or forty years ago, educators could afford to be complacent. The first twenty-five years after World War II was a time of sustained prosperity and national self-confidence. College students had few fundamental worries about their economic prospects, and college faculties paid scant attention to this matter. Leaders in business and higher education presided over impressive patterns of expansion.

But if the postwar era was marked by steady growth and increasing opportunity, the century's end is characterized by constant change and heightened uncertainty. Challenged since the 1970s by mounting global competition, American businesses are restructuring, downsizing and merging. New forms of organization are being introduced. Technology is transforming the way we do business. New markets and new sources of skilled employees are being sought overseas.

No one can know with confidence where these dynamics are taking us. Yet some trends are clear. We can see that, despite encouraging employment statistics, workers at all levels of education are more vulnerable to job loss today than in the past. We can see, despite prosperity, a widening income gap between those who are doing well and those who are struggling. We can see, even in this time of plenty, the disruption of vital social services. We can see, above all, that we are in a period of unpredictable change in the economic and institutional structures upon which our livelihoods and indeed our lives depend.

VI

There is in all this a challenge for higher education. In a sea change since the early postwar years, today's students sense the hazards of the new economic conditions and demand that those who would prepare them for life also prepare them for work. This university, with our historic commitment to practice, is ideally suited to respond.

It is not difficult, despite our uncertainty about the future, to identify capacities that will be critical for successful professionals in the twenty-first century. They will need the highest possible intellectual mastery. Opportunities for young Americans lie increasingly in technical, professional and managerial positions requiring advanced skills in analysis and problem solving. Our first order of business must be to sustain academic standards commensurate with the pressures of an unforgiving competitive environment.

Adaptability will also be essential. Young people today must anticipate multiple changes in their jobs and even their careers. Individuals must be able to transfer their competence from one setting to another and adapt to different organizational settings. The key to such flexibility is a deep understanding of basic concepts and their applicability to widely varying circumstances.

Finally, more and more of the world's work is being done in teams. Organizations are assigning decision-making roles to mid-level working groups. Members of these groups are drawn from a society growing ever more diverse within enterprises becoming ever more international. Those who would flourish must be good collaborators and must possess a high level of cross cultural understanding.

Teaching students more complex skills; helping them become adaptable; fostering collaborative abilities: these needs call out to us to fundamentally rethink our educational programs. We must broaden, deepen and intensify the learning experiences of Northeastern students.

I spoke earlier of the three great traditions on which Northeastern's practice-oriented programs have been based: the

traditions of professional education, liberal learning, and apprenticeship. Our historic achievement has been to develop each of these traditions to an impressive level--in our professional colleges, in our College of Arts and Sciences, and in our co-op program. Yet we offer each type of learning experience separately, largely in isolation from the other two, leaving students to figure out for themselves how liberal learning undergirds professional skill, how concrete experience informs academic theory, and how abstract conception leads to practical insight. This fragmentation robs our programs of impact. To fully empower our graduates, we must create a new form of education that synthesizes the three learning experiences we offer. Only through curricular structures in which students experience each part of our program in a structured relationship to the other two will they gain the full benefit of the whole.

An integrated plan of practice-oriented education remains for our faculty to invent, but certain features are imperative. Such a program would offer students a rich array of double or dual majors involving coursework in the basic disciplines of the arts and sciences as well as in professional fields. This approach would enrich students' understanding of the interaction between theory and application. An integrated curriculum would also create contexts in which students on co-op would critically examine how classroom theory translates into workplace solution. These experiences would heighten students' ability to apply basic ideas in multiple settings. Finally, an integrated program would include classroom experiences devoted to analyzing and even simulating the social interactions encountered on co-op. These opportunities would greatly increase collaborative abilities.

The Northeastern faculty has taken important steps to build connections within our curriculum. As part of our Strategic Plan, we are experimenting with links between co-op and classroom. Through the Academic Common Experience, we are tying general education to the major. What remains to be done is to take these partial initiatives all the way and design a fully integrated five-year program. That is the great challenge we face. That is where we will find the opportunity for national leadership.

We know our students are up to the task. Our responsibility is to give them the chance. To make concrete Northeastern's determination to help our students achieve excellence in professional studies and liberal learning and co-op, I am announcing today a new program of Presidential Scholarships. These will be full, three-year tuition grants awarded annually to twelve sophomores who have exhibited distinction in all three parts of our curriculum. The first Presidential Scholars will be selected this spring and will represent the highest aspiration of undergraduate education at Northeastern.

VII

I have stressed that Northeastern takes special pride in scholarship that focuses on social needs, and we have seen that we have much to celebrate. But our achievements in research and public service have resulted chiefly from the efforts of individual faculty or small groups pursuing particular interests. As we assume leadership as a practice-oriented university, we must, in research and service as in education, intensify our efforts through new structures, new initiatives, and a campus-wide commitment.

Northeastern must seek systematically to be a place where current scholarship is brought to bear on contemporary problems. We must create interdisciplinary research centers and institutes specifically charged to address these issues. We must design workshops, colloquia and continuing education programs for active professionals who seek to understand the best current practice in their fields. We must view the culmination of research not solely in publication but in application. We must create organizational structures to help academic ideas bear practical fruit. We must fully recognize the intellectual achievements of those whose research addresses the concerns of business, government agencies, non-profit institutions and local communities. And finally we must involve faculty members in service activities based upon their scholarly expertise so that the direct experience of practice can inform classroom instruction.

To make concrete our commitment to distinction in practice-oriented scholarship, I am announcing today a new \$25 million program of Trustee Professorships. Over the next three years we will create eight named chairs, each supported by an endowment fund. These chairs will be awarded to new appointees who have achieved national distinction in their fields and whose work is characterized by usefulness and recognition in the professional arenas that correspond to our degree-granting colleges.

VIII

So this is our challenge. We must be true to our roots. We must remain student centered by providing opportunity for talented undergraduates from all backgrounds. We must be urban in our engagement with the city and in our commitment to diversity. While we honor tradition, we must treasure the achievements of our first century, especially our evolution as a national research university and our renewed dedication to high academic standards.

Above all, we must reinvent ourselves as a practice-oriented university committed to co-operative education. In sustaining this focus, we must capture and combine the mutually reinforcing potential of both professional and liberal education. Ultimately, we must focus on practice because, in empowering our students to do useful work, we provide them with the surest basis of personal dignity and the truest path to self discovery.

As we pursue these goals, let us also remember that we are part of the great academic community so richly represented here today--the largest, most diverse, most socially involved system of higher education the world has ever seen. We at Northeastern will do our part to look outward to the needs of society rather than inward to the aggrandizements of institutional life, and we will we honor and support our sister universities in pursuing their own forms of social contribution and institutional integrity. I am convinced that if we do these things, we will together reclaim the public support that we have allowed to erode.

It is therefore my privilege, in accepting the presidency of

Northeastern, to join with all of you to insure that in our generation higher education pushes back against economic forces that divide us and against social forces that weaken us, and that we do our part to sustain our ancient dream of opportunity for all. And as we remember that dream let us recall the stirring voice of Martin Luther King, on the night before his death, calling upon us, as we rise up from this gathering, to "rise up...with a greater readiness," to "stand with a greater determination," to "move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America a better nation."

Let the work begin. All hail Northeastern.

Other addresses:

1998

- [State of the University Address](#), 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
- [Address to the Northeastern Corporation](#), May 28, 1997
- [Remarks to the Boston Chamber of Commerce](#), April 4, 1997
- [Address to the University Community](#), February 27, 1997

1996

- [State of the University Address](#), September 30, 1996
- [Acceptance Remarks to the University Community](#), May

29, 1996

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