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Prepared remarks to the Boston Foundation Board of Directors

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Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

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Introduction

I would like to begin by congratulating the Boston Foundation, your board of directors, and your president and CEO Paul Grogan for the role you have assumed in Boston. The foundation is filling an important niche as convener of the “town” and of the town’s expertise on issues of vital importance including support for our cultural institutions, the challenge of affordable housing, and the interactions between our colleges and universities and the wider community — to name just three areas that I have been involved in — as well as a host of others. The foundation is a major force for policy development and civic thinking, although I am not surprised about this given the quality of the people associated with the foundation at both the board level and the administrative level. You represent some of the most thoughtful citizens of Boston.

I am very pleased to be invited to speak with you tonight on the relationship between our academic institutions and the overall health and well-being of the region. This is a topic close to my heart. I came to Boston 35 years ago because of its strength as an academic center. I have spent my entire career at two universities with special connections to the regional community — the University of Massachusetts, Boston and Northeastern University — with a very short hiatus in New York City, which only served to remind me how much I love Boston and why this is such a special place.

So my starting point in addressing this topic should be evident: I regard our collection of colleges and universities as a regional treasure, a unique treasure. I tell groups of high school students that Boston is the best college town in the world. I think that is a true statement. And yet, although many would nod in agreement with such a characterization, I am not sure that we in academia and we the broader regional community have it right in the way we manage the relationship between gown and town, or even in the way we think about this topic.

So let me begin with how we think about this matter. When discussing the Goldberg Seminar, Paul Grogan likes to talk about the need for a “paradigm shift” in the way the community, and

especially our elected officials speaking for the community, think about higher education. I have been much taken with this idea. And so — with proper scholarly acknowledgment of Paul's influence on my thinking — let me talk first about how academia in this region has thought about its relationship to the community and how, in turn, the community has thought about higher education. And then I'd like to comment on some current developments, including the work of the Goldberg Seminar, that I believe signal a shift toward a new and more hopeful approach to the town – gown relationship.

Academia's View of the Community

We can characterize academia's historical relationship to — and impact on — its surrounding community in terms of three paradigms. The first involves what we might classify as "incidental impacts." These are impacts that occur naturally because of what we do as academic institutions; they are byproducts of our pursuing our institutional work and our institutional interests. For example, we strengthen the regional economy by providing jobs, spending money, building buildings, and attracting federal research dollars. These are all important contributions to regional well-being and we issue economic impact reports cataloguing these benefits, and we are right to do so. But it is also the case that we are not doing these things because of the benefits they bring to the community, any more than a major business enterprise creates jobs and spends dollars because of their local benefits. These are things we do because of who we are. That is the sense in which I call them incidental. And there are lots of other kinds of benefits to be included under this heading: our impact on the cultural life of the region; our role in attracting talent to Boston; our role in fostering the strength of our health care institutions; even, for some of our major institutions, our role in educating undergraduates.

Set alongside these incidental impacts are what I would call "intentional contributions." These are impacts that occur because an academic institution consciously sets out to strengthen or support the region in a particular way. Examples of intentional contributions include the creation of a research institute focused on addressing problems of regional development, like our Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern, or the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard, or the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at UMass Boston. Other examples could include a decision by a college or university to work closely with the public schools — Boston University's decision to take over the schools of Chelsea, for example, or Northeastern University's decision to focus our School of Education on the City of Boston. We could multiply the examples here, too: recruiting and supporting students from our city neighborhoods, working with community-oriented health-care facilities, purchasing goods and services from local vendors, inviting local residents to use institutional facilities. Such activities are not eccentric or random. They draw on a rich tradition of community service in higher education that goes back at least to the land-grant movement of the mid-19th century that produced UMass Amherst and greatly influenced MIT. They

draw also on Progressive Era impulses to shape academic institutions appropriate for urban America that produced Northeastern, Simmons, and Suffolk. Many of us can also remember how strong and important the theme of community service in academia was in the 1960s, as institutions of higher education responded to the preoccupations of that era with the plight of our cities.

A third kind of impact — frequently confused with intentional contributions because the underlying impetus for our actions is often hidden — are what I would call “extracted benefits.” Such contributions occur because a community or city has demanded them as a quid pro quo for something the institution needs. They are, for a college or university, a cost of doing business. The classic case involves building construction or land acquisition. The institution needs official approval to proceed — a zoning change, for example. It quickly becomes clear that the price of approval will be a neighborhood park, or a set of scholarships, or dedicated use of part of the new building for a worthy public purpose, or a contribution to affordable housing. In the world of public relations, academic intuitions often claim credit for these kinds of activities, which is fair enough, but if we are to understand honestly the relationship between institutions of higher education and their communities we also need to be clear about what is actually going on.

So — at risk of oversimplification — I offer these three traditional paradigms for the way academic institutions impact their surrounding communities: incidental impacts, intentional contributions, and extracted benefits. I would suggest that the largest positive impacts universities make are those I have characterized as incidental, and that a large percentage of what we claim as intentional contributions are directly or indirectly best understood as extracted benefits. This is not in any way to belittle or demean the good faith of academic institutions in mounting activities that strengthen the regional community out of a genuine sense of mission. The tradition of community service to which I referred a moment ago is quite real. My own institution proudly claims affiliation with that philosophy, and I would say the same thing about a number of other of our major institutions at different points in their histories and to varying degrees. That said, I would stand by the generalization I offered a moment ago: The largest contributions of our colleges and universities on the regional community are incidental, and many of the intended contributions are to one degree or another extracted.

The Community’s View of Academia

Let me look now at the paradigm of the university – community relationship from the point of view of the community, and particularly of the city. Here, again, it is fairly easy to define the attitudes that have traditionally characterized the relationship. At the top of the list, inevitably, is the view that colleges and universities are a burden to the town. They have tax-exempt status, and so they remove land that could be used for other productive uses, factors that lead to demands for payment in lieu

of taxes or a resistance to their expansion. Beyond that are the iconic problems of the town/gown relationship, in particular the negative impacts of large student communities in terms of their behavior, their impact on housing, their impact on parking, and so forth.

Closely related to the view of colleges as a burden is the view of colleges as a source of subsidy. This, of course, is the origin of what, from the institutional perspective, is the extractive mode of the relationship — the perspective that when an academic institution needs something, or even against the possibility that it might need something in the future, it is appropriate that there be a quid pro quo for the community. The logic is simple and straightforward. The city is strapped for funds to do good things. Colleges and universities look comparatively rich and, by comparison with public agencies, many of them are. The issue of tax exemption hovers in the background. The result is inevitable: The institution needing an approval of some kind gets it. The city and community get something valuable. Everybody wins, sort of, and there is something important to celebrate at the ribbon cutting, although, in truth, it is not clear that anyone feels especially great about the outcome.

A final element of public paradigm or attitude toward academia involves the notion that colleges and universities are actually an asset to the town because they play such a vital role in our economic and social and cultural strength. From this perspective, communities and public authorities can be animated to support and assist academic institutions in their development.

Looking at these three paradigms for the community – university relationship, which have been dominant? I would say that the first two have been more prevalent than the third. The view of universities as a drain on local resources has historically been very strong and even dominant. I hasten to say that over my years of involvement in academia, I believe there has been growing recognition of the ways in which academic institutions are a source of regional strength. This is now a staple of public discourse by community leaders in both the public and private sectors. That said, I do not think that as a community we have yet found a way to translate the third paradigm into effective action. How often have the leaders of private institutions — institutions that are, effectively, largely responsible for the eminence the Boston area enjoys in higher education — been asked by civic leaders how the community can help their campuses to flourish? I daresay not very often. Even public-sector higher education, with its deep and structural commitment to serving the region, has struggled — and quite honestly continues to struggle — to receive much meaningful recognition of its importance to the regional community.

So, again at some risk of overstatement, here is my shorthand summary of the traditional paradigm for university – community relationships in Boston: what has dominated the scene in terms of institutional attitudes have been incidental impacts rather than intentional contributions, and what has dominated in terms of civic attitudes has been in many ways the reciprocal of that, the

view of universities as a burden and therefore an appropriate object for extracted benefits.

The Need for a New Perspective

Against this background, what is wrong with this picture? The answer, in my view — at this stage in the city's history and at this stage in the history of academia — is everything. The first fact to consider is that the well-being of universities is inextricably linked to the well-being of surrounding communities. This would seem so obvious that it would hardly seem necessary to state it. But consider the recent history of Harvard and Yale, two of our nation's greatest institutions historically, and both still great. It is very clear that Harvard has in recent years far surpassed Yale in breadth and depth of institutional strength and wealth. Can anyone doubt that that has something to do with the difference between Boston – Cambridge and New Haven? Institutions somewhat lower on the pecking order also tend to be very clear about this. We at Northeastern have no doubt that our ability to attract students and faculty has everything to do with our location in the country's greatest college town. Similarly, there is no way that Tufts, BU, or BC would have transformed themselves into the academic powerhouses they are today from the mediocre, local institutions they all were just two generations ago or less without taking advantage of their location here in Boston.

So any notion within academia that the university — at least one located in a major city or metropolitan area — can be indifferent to the health of that community is nonsense. There may have been a time when academics could think that way. The academic tradition going back to the Middle Ages, of course, is to exist apart from the nonacademic community, and many of our country's leading colleges and universities intentionally located in remote places where the outside world could not intrude. That almost monastic view of academia has persisted through much of our history at mainstream institutions. Urban universities like Northeastern, with their tradition of connection to local communities, have traditionally represented a marginal and low-status theme in higher education.

This history may explain some of academia's tendency to remain apart from the surrounding community, but this is a view that has clearly become obsolete. I am happy to report that this reality has been recognized by institutions such as Penn, Columbia, Case Western Reserve, and USC, to name just a few universities that have invested substantial organizational and financial resources in working with their neighbors and with public officials to create a stronger urban community. There is, I think, a clear movement from relying comfortably on incidental impacts to characterize academia's relationships with their communities to a readiness to focus much more on intentional contributions to regional well-being. The organization that Paul Grogan created, CEOs for Cities, is based on this premise.

Beyond the intrinsic interdependence of university and community as a reason for a new paradigm within higher

education, there are powerful academic reasons for universities to think more proactively about their relationships with communities. Urban centers can be fantastic resources for education and research. This is especially true at a place like Northeastern, with our tradition of cooperative education, where we make a point of using the urban setting as an opportunity for our students to get practical experience related to their field of study, and where many of our scholars focus their research on urban issues. But it is hard to imagine that any serious academic institution, whether it calls itself an urban university or not, would not want its students to take advantage of the learning opportunities offered by a place like Boston to enhance their studies. Students today, far more than their counterparts of a generation ago, crave opportunities to venture outside the walls of the campus in order to enrich their experience and expand their learning. City-based universities are benefiting tremendously from this, while traditional elite institutions in more removed locations have lost some of their attractiveness.

So I would argue that academic institutions in Boston need to dispense with any remnant of the traditional notion that they exist in a world apart from the communities in which they are embedded, and they need to seek ways to proactively interact with those communities to contribute to their health.

The traditional paradigms through which communities interact with universities — seeing them as problems or as petitioners from whom tributes can be exacted — are equally obsolete. The memory of the way MIT drove development around Route 128 remains strong. The emergence of Boston as a world-class center for health care is clearly linked to the presence of our medical schools — witness the recent move to Boston of Merck, Pfizer, and Novartis.

And the economic significance of Boston's academic community grows stronger as we see the accelerating pattern of corporate headquarters moving away from Boston. It has become a kind of cliché, but it is true. Our leading bank can suddenly find itself being run from Charlotte. Our top insurance company can be operated out of Montreal. A leading manufacturer can be acquired by a company based in Cincinnati. By contrast, colleges and universities are site specific. Harvard isn't going anywhere. MIT isn't going anywhere. Northeastern isn't going anywhere. So increasingly we become the reliable anchors on which the community needs to depend not only for jobs and expenditures but also for corporate citizenship much more broadly.

The traditional paradigms of university-community relations have been overtaken by new realities for both colleges and universities and for the city. But as is often the case, external realities change faster than attitudes and habits. Our challenge today within academia — with our emphasis on coexisting with our surrounding communities and relying on the incidental benefits of our presence to enhance our neighborhoods — is to shift toward actively working with community leaders for our mutual benefit. The challenge for local communities and civic officials — who approach colleges and universities as land-hungry institutional

expansionists whose growth should be resisted or accepted only if some sort of reciprocal benefit can be extracted — is to move toward seeing such institutions as critical engines of regional development. What is clear, of course, is that these twin paradigm shifts are the mirror image of each other. Their logic is reciprocal. One can't happen without the other. Viewed strictly as a political matter, one won't happen without the other.

Two Current Developments

And that brings me, in the final part of my talk tonight, to two current developments that — along with the patterns I have mentioned in Philadelphia, New York, Cleveland, and Los Angeles — I hope and believe are pointing the way toward the paradigm shift that I have been discussing. The first involves the way we are trying to position Northeastern University among the academic institutions of Boston and the country. The second involves the work of the Goldberg Seminars. I will offer a few words about each of these topics and then I'll stop and see if anything I have said has triggered some thoughts and questions and discussion.

Urban Engagement at Northeastern

What is interesting about Northeastern in the context of tonight's discussion is that we are, in many ways, becoming less of a classic urban university than we once were. Most of you know our history. For most of our 107 years of existence we have been, in fact, the archetypical urban university. Our students came mostly from Boston and the city's suburbs. Most were commuters. Most were first-generation college students from modest backgrounds. We stressed access and scale over selectivity. We kept our costs low and provided a practical, no-frills education with a heavy emphasis on professional fields. Our program of cooperative education was a way young people could pay for college by alternating periods of full-time work and full-time study. We worked with local employers to create co-op jobs. We worked with the local schools. We were deeply involved with our community. We were, in effect, a quasi-public institution providing education here in Boston in a region that was late and slow to develop a public system of higher education that offered the kinds of services provided by urban public universities in other states.

That version of Northeastern flourished for many years. In the 1970s we became the largest private university in the United States. That version of Northeastern worked pretty well as a business proposition, too. With our low costs and high volume we did very well financially and in most years were able to earn budgetary surpluses well into the 1980s.

This was a wonderful, proud mission of Northeastern that also served this community well for many years. But it was also a doomed vision, and what doomed it was the growth of public higher education in Massachusetts that began in a serious way in the 1950s and accelerated in the 1960s with the founding of UMass Boston, the growth of community colleges, and the

conversion of state teachers colleges into comprehensive four-year institutions. By the late 1980s the kinds of students who historically had come to Northeastern because it was affordable were turning in ever increasing numbers to public institutions that offered comparable academic quality at prices far below those we could sustain even with our emphasis on keeping costs down.

By the early 1990s Northeastern was in a genuine crisis. We could not attract enough students to make our budgets work, even by admitting virtually everyone who applied. Looking at this situation, our trustees realized that we couldn't continue being what we historically had been. It was time, they concluded, for a new version of Northeastern, one that like other private institutions focused on quality rather than access and scale. The logic was simple: If you can't compete on price, you have to compete on quality. So the conclusion was inevitable: In a statement that became common on campus, Northeastern needed to become a lot smaller and a lot better.

So that is what we have been doing for the past 15 years, and certainly for the nine years that I have been president. We have cut our freshman class from over 4,000 students to less than 3,000. We have recruited actively out of state and out of the region. We have built an attractive residential campus. We have beefed up our programs and faculty with impressive new hires of scholars with national reputations. We have retooled co-op to emphasize its benefits as a learning experience rather than as a way to pay for college. We have set our sights on being recognized as one of the top 100 universities in the country in this decade.

And — if I can throw in a commercial here — we are doing very well in creating this new version of Northeastern. Last fall we had more than 24,000 applications for 2,800 freshman places. Our admit rate of 42 percent made us one of the more selective universities in the country. Our freshman class hailed from all over the Northeast down to northern Virginia, with significant and growing numbers from the South, Midwest, and West and a large international student body. Our mean freshman SAT is now 1211. Along with this more talented and cosmopolitan student body, we have built genuine centers of excellence in several academic disciplines, especially in the sciences and engineering, and we now rank 11th in research expenditures among private universities without medical schools. We have also risen steadily in the rankings: this year we jumped into the top half of the U.S. News & World Report rankings for the first time in our history, a remarkable change for an institution that a decade ago had fallen into the bottom quartile of the rankings.

So we are a different place today than we were 15 or 25 or 50 years ago. What has become of our involvement with the city as we have made this change? We have thought a lot about this question. We have looked at the examples of other local private institutions that were once focused on Boston like us but have since moved away from that emphasis as they have become more residential and selective and national. We have concluded

that we want to pursue a different route. Our ties to the city are too deep and too much a part of who we are to abandon as we craft our new version of Northeastern.

And so we have set our sights on becoming New England's premier urban university. We can no longer base this claim on admissions policies emphasizing local access, although we do still attach importance to enrolling kids from the local community. The heart of our vision involves connecting our work in every conceivable way to the life of the city and making that partnership with the city a central part of our educational experiences and our scholarly activities. So our Center for Urban and Regional Policy studies urban issues by working on the challenges of our neighboring communities. Our School of Education does it through student teaching in the Boston schools. Our School of Law is deeply involved in community-service work. Our College of Criminal Justice partners with the local police. Our College of Health Sciences emphasizes community health through links with neighborhood-based health centers. I could multiply the examples, but I think you get the point. Our strategic view is this: As universities gain prominence nationally as anchor institutions for their local communities, there is a vital role for institutions like Northeastern that are seeking recognition as a top-tier campus to stress our urban connections as an indication not just of a community-service ethic but of educational richness and scholarly power. I am persuaded that pursuing our dream of being New England's premier urban university will also carry us a long way toward our goal of recognition among the nation's top 100 universities.

Other Institutions and the Goldberg Seminars

I cite Northeastern as one example of an institution that seeks to flourish by partnering with our local community rather than holding that community at arm's length. What about other institutions? Is the kind of pattern emerging at Northeastern applicable to other campuses? This is where the Carol R. Goldberg Seminar comes in. The seminar, under the Boston Foundation sponsorship, has convened all the public and private academic institutions in the Boston area to talk about how we, as a total academic community, can most constructively relate to the region of which we are a part. The seminar also includes representatives of other constituencies with whom academic institutions interact: businesses, the non-profit sector, local communities, and government. We have been meeting for about a year now in various configurations pursuing two essential and concurrent dialogues: one among institutions of higher education and one between academic institutions as a group and the other key constituencies I mentioned.

There are many themes in our discussions, but the one I want to highlight is the shared perception that the region's academic institutions should come together, as an industry, and across institutional lines, to find ways to enhance the health of our regional community. This is a perception that seems to unite virtually all participants — schools of widely varying size and character, some of international reputation and wide scope,

some small and local in impact. It seems likely that one result of our work will be a new compact among us and I am hopeful that we will be able to identify a focus around which we can unite to learn how we can work together and to demonstrate the potential of an organized effort. In dialogue with the other constituencies that are part of the seminar we have identified several possibilities, the two most prominent being the challenges of affordable housing and the need to assure postsecondary educational opportunities for young people of the region. I am not yet sure how we will focus our efforts. Nor am I sure what organizational form the compact will take. But I do feel quite confident that one result of our work will be a new effort to organize ourselves across institutional lines in order to contribute more effectively than any of us can do individually to the overall development of the region.

One of the things that is animating our academic institutions in this effort is our shared frustration with the traditional paradigm of town – gown relations in Boston and, especially, the emphasis on extracted benefits. This new effort constitutes an invitation to our communities and our civic leadership to partner with us in a new way. Our goal is to make manifest our commitment to this region and our readiness to contribute to its progress in an organized, intentional manner. Our hope is to elicit a new commitment by the region to working in partnership with us. What we propose will be, of course, only a small beginning. But I am hopeful it will be a seed from which something large and important and deeply different from past patterns can grow.

So it is a time of excitement and hopefulness in the arena of university – community relationships and, not surprisingly, the Boston Foundation is right in the middle of it. Thank you for the great work you are doing and thank you for your attention this evening.