

April 02, 1997

## Remarks to the Boston Chamber of Commerce

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*Northeastern University*

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### Recommended Citation

Freeland (1941-), Richard M., "Remarks to the Boston Chamber of Commerce" (1997). *Freeland Speeches*. Paper 27.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10010920>

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**SPEECHES OF RICHARD M. FREELAND**

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[SPEECHES](#)  
[OP-EDS](#)  
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**Remarks to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce  
April 4, 1997  
Meridien Hotel, Boston**

It is a great pleasure as the recently installed president of Northeastern University to address this group. I have long been aware of the important role played by the chamber in promoting the well being of the region, not only as an advocate for business but as a catalyst for partnerships among private, non-profit and public institutions and a voice for civic awareness among all three. Given this tradition, I note with special enthusiasm the leadership that Paul Guzzi has brought to this organization since his appointment last year. To cite just two examples, his role fighting to retain an appointed school committee and in focusing the chamber's attention on four industries that hold the key to our future has given us all a surge of fresh energy.

It also pleases me to appear before you as the representative of Northeastern University, an institution I admired for many years before I was asked to lead it, and a corporate citizen of Boston with a special relationship to the business community from our founding in 1898 down to the present. Though colleges and universities are often viewed as a breed apart from economic institutions, Northeastern is, in truth, a major local employer with a \$300 million annual budget and substantial capital investments in this city. So we have been active members of the chamber for many years, and we share many concerns and interests with our colleagues from the business community.

My focus today is the role of the urban university, a vast topic with a particular salience here in Boston, where institutions of higher education play such a conspicuous and even unique role. I am especially conscious of the remarkable environment of higher education in this region as a result of my recent period of exile in New York City, where there is far less consciousness of the economic importance of higher education and where inter-institutional linkages between academia and the business community are far less developed. So I'd like to begin my comments with a few reflections on the special character of higher education in the Boston metropolitan area, and then talk more specifically about the role of urban universities and of Northeastern in this context. Along the way I hope to make you aware of some striking changes that are occurring at the familiar grey-brick campus on Huntington Avenue and share with you a vision of the enhanced contributions Northeastern intends to make to this region over the next decade.

I have said that higher education occupies a unique role in Boston. This statement is by no means hyperbole or local boosterism. Our metropolitan community possesses the greatest concentration of academic institutions in North America and very possibly the world. It is difficult to think of any other major city so closely identified with higher education or so dependent upon academia for its creative energy and financial strength. The basic facts are familiar to all of you. Collectively colleges and universities are among the largest employers in the region, they bring into our economy the buying power of hundreds of thousands of students and staff; they transform their students into the professional workforce that is one of our greatest assets; they attract millions of dollars of federal, foundation and corporate support, and they use these dollars to sponsor research and service activities that have vast economic as well as social benefits. It is simply impossible to imagine the strength of large sectors of the metropolitan economy – from the computer industry to the biotech industry to the health care industry, without the presence of the academic sector. It is equally impossible to imagine Boston's vibrant cultural life without the presence of a strong academic community.

Less obvious than the symbiotic relationship between higher

education and a range of crucial non-academic activities, is the way in which the internal dynamics of academia add value to the region's economic and cultural life. Scholars are often viewed as genteel and even otherworldly, but the reality is that the colleges and universities crowded together in our metropolitan community engage in fierce competition for students, faculty, resources, and reputation. And it is my view that this inter-institutional competition is the great engine that has driven the impressive histories of our most prominent colleges and universities and has provided thereby much of the underlying energy for the contributions of higher education collectively to the region.

The positive effects of inter-institutional competition within higher education can be illustrated by a quick review of its impact on urban universities here in Boston. When I use the term "urban universities" I refer to a particular class of institutions, which focus their energies on the economic and social betterment of the community where they are located. Northeastern is in many ways a classic urban university. Harvard can serve as a local example of a great university that happens to be located in the Boston area and which brings many benefits to us but is not an urban university as that term is commonly used.

During the first half of this century there were three urban universities in Boston – Boston University, Boston College, and Northeastern University – all of them independent, that is to say private, and each of them serving different components of the community with differing mixes of students and programs. Despite their differences, however, all three were essentially local institutions: lacking dormitories, they enrolled chiefly commuting students from the immediate area, and they had limited academic standing or ambitions beyond the region. In these years before World War II, it is important to remember, public higher education was woefully underdeveloped in Massachusetts. There was no state university. The institution that would become UMass was still a small state college in Amherst. The other state colleges were basically teacher-training institutions. And there was no community college system. So in Boston, BU, BC, and Northeastern played the role

that public institutions had taken on in other parts of the country. They kept their costs down to remain accessible to local students from modest backgrounds, engaging in a lively competition with each other for this market, and they focused their service ambitions on the schools, governmental, social service, and business institutions in the region.

All that changed radically in the 1950s and 1960s for two primary reasons. First, the flight of middle class residents to the suburbs raised serious questions for all three institutions about their ability to flourish by serving a predominantly urban population. Second, the late-blooming development of the public sector, and especially the establishment of a Boston campus for the University of Massachusetts in 1964, created for the first time the prospect of serious competition for students from urban backgrounds between the public and independent sectors, a competition that leaders of private institutions, especially at BU and BC, did not think they could win. Indeed, for a period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as UMass\Boston began to grow and before the arrival of two leadership giants, Father Donald Monan and John Silber, both BU and BC went through crises of direction and funding that fostered far from idle speculation that both might collapse or be absorbed into the state system. Northeastern, by contrast, had carved out a somewhat more specialized niche than our two sister institutions and continued to flourish in this period.

What happened in the 1970s and 1980s at BU and BC is as powerful a demonstration of the benefits of inter-institutional competition in academia as could be found. Not only did these two institutions find new ways to compete by transforming themselves from locally oriented urban universities into regional and national residential institutions, but they flourished as never before, bringing talented students, accomplished scholars, and new sources of revenue, energy, and creativity into the region. Indeed, by the end of the 1980s these two institutions were so expanded in geographic reach and transformed in function that they could no longer properly be considered urban universities at all. Within the independent sector, only Northeastern sustained a primary commitment to the city of Boston, to urban populations, and to urban involvements.

I cite the cases of BU and BC as two examples of how our community is enhanced and enriched through the competition that characterizes the interactions among colleges and universities in this region, and I cite the leadership of Donald Monan and John Silber in directing these transformations with genuine admiration. At the same time, it is a point of pride for me as President of Northeastern to be associated with a university that has sustained its commitment to this community at a time when competitive conditions permitted and even urged withdrawal. Today Northeastern enrolls the largest number of high school graduates from the Boston area of any local independent university and devotes a larger proportion of our institutional energies to serving the metropolitan community than any of our sister institutions. To take just one example, Northeastern far outstrips every other area university in the dollars we contribute to the Boston public schools through the work of the Higher Education Partnership, which links colleges and high schools in a network of collaboration. And our local involvements extend to health care and social service agencies as well as the police and the courts. At the present time I believe Northeastern can fairly lay claim to status as the city's premier urban university, even as we acknowledge the contributions of our sister institutions, including the steady development of UMass\Boston.

Yet competition among institutions is a constant source of change in academia, just as it is within the business community, and competition is generating new challenges at Northeastern University. You are perhaps familiar with the role we have historically played in this city. Since our founding in 1898, we have always focused on preparing students for useful work, first in law, engineering, and business, later in health care, criminal justice, and computer science. The liberal arts and sciences, which constitute the core of most traditional universities, developed late at Northeastern, and have come into their own only in recent years. We have also, from early in our history, been a pioneer in cooperative education through which our students alternate periods of full-time study with periods of full-time paid employment, mostly in the businesses of the Boston area. In addition, as a true urban university, we have always sought to make our programs as accessible as possible. We have

offered a no-frills education, keeping our costs down, eschewing many of the amenities of traditional campus life, and devoting most of our energies to undergraduate education rather than the more glamorous graduate programs and research enterprises on which the reputations of our sister institutions so heavily rest.

Over the years the graduates of Northeastern's programs, mostly from very modest backgrounds, many who would not have attended college had we not existed, have made major contributions to the economy of this region. Among our living alumni are the founders of some 300 businesses, including some of the largest and most successful companies in Massachusetts. So the directions we have historically followed have been both distinctive and productive, and, pursuing them in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s we became very big, growing, indeed, into the largest private university in the United States. We survived financially not through fundraising or government grants but from the payments we received from students.

Pursuing the proud, locally oriented role that I have just outlined, Northeastern flourished through the 1980s. In 1990, however, we experienced a defining crisis that caused the leadership of the institution to realize that a mission that had served the university and the city well for many years was no longer viable. In September 1990 Northeastern found itself under-enrolled by some 1,000 students, precipitating a financial freefall that would preoccupy us for the next several years. What became clear in the wake of this crisis to my able predecessor, Jack Curry, was that Northeastern had grown far too large and in the process allowed our academic standards to fall much too low. The dilemma was stark. On one side, many students who historically might have attended Northeastern now had very respectable options in the public sector at much lower cost than we or an independent institution could sustain. On the other side, many students who had the means to take advantage of private higher education did not find sufficient qualitative value in Northeastern's programs to justify the added costs. The conclusion was inexorable: to remain competitive, Northeastern must become significantly smaller and academically much better.

Northeastern's crisis of 1990 provides yet another example of the extraordinary creative power unleashed by inter-institutional competition within higher education. Galvanized by the realization that our competitive position had grown hazardously weak, the leaders of Northeastern set about systematically to recast the university as a smaller and better institution. Enrollments were reduced from about 15,000 in 1989 to about 11,000 today. The budget was cut, and staff levels were pared. Simultaneously, qualitative improvements were initiated. Admission standards were raised. Academic programs were made more rigorous as were the demands on faculty for scholarly productivity. Major investments were made in the physical plant. And, gradually, during the first half of the 1990s, Northeastern was able to stabilize its position. During the last few years, applications have turned upward again and standards of admission have risen noticeably. The new emphasis on academic upgrading has also paid off: in 1994 Northeastern achieved the status of a Research II university, a designation that reflects the standing and productivity of our scholars and our graduate programs. In addition, campus improvements have transformed the once dreary facilities on Huntington Avenue into one of the most attractive campuses in the region. (It's true! If you haven't been on campus lately come and see for yourself. I guarantee you'll be amazed.)

By the time I became president last fall, Northeastern was ready to move beyond the atmosphere of crisis management and damage control that had dominated the early 1990s. The specific challenge, as I have conceived it, has been to define a direction of development that is true to the distinctive traditions that have made Northeastern such a valuable corporate citizen of this town yet can project us into the future as an academically strengthened and financially robust member of the Boston academic community. We do not propose to transform ourselves into a conventional university, and we do not intend to walk away from our historic commitment to this city. Our goal, rather, is to raise academic standards and to attract more students from beyond the immediate area while continuing to be a place of opportunity for local students from modest backgrounds. Similarly, we seek to continue strengthening the scholarly standing of our faculty, while also continuing our

involvements with the schools, the neighborhoods, local social service agencies, and governmental organizations. Our intention, in short, is to achieve dramatic qualitative improvements and broader recognition while retaining our character as a student-centered, practice-oriented, and urban institution.

Our ambitions for qualitative improvements go beyond merely doing better what we already do well. We believe that the challenges posed by economic change demand something more dramatic of Northeastern than incremental enhancements. And we know that to succeed in the most competitive academic marketplace in North America we need to offer something not only distinctive but distinguished. Our intention, accordingly, is to assert national leadership in practice-oriented education and a much stronger role in bringing the practical benefits of scholarship to bear on issues of regional development. In the final part of my remarks I shall briefly outline our plans in these two critical arenas.

I mentioned earlier that education at Northeastern has always emphasized preparation for practical work. Most of our students are in one of seven professionally oriented colleges, with the largest two historically being engineering and business, though in recent years the health sciences have grown dramatically. Looking ahead, I do not anticipate major changes in the range of programs that we offer, nor do I anticipate significant increases in the size of these programs. Rather, we shall increase the academic rigor of our professional programs, college by college, competitive arena by competitive arena. Equally important, we shall restructure professional education at Northeastern to fully integrate these curricula with the two other great educational traditions present on our campus, apprenticeship, which we embody in our program of cooperative education, and liberal learning.

Northeastern has always believed in the benefits of all three of these educational traditions, and our historic achievement has been to develop each of them to an impressive level – in our professional colleges, in our College of Arts and Sciences, and in co-op. Yet in these established structures we have offered

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 school, how concrete experience informs academic theory, and how abstract conception leads to practical insight. This fragmentation robs our programs of impact. The more powerful form of education that we intend to create will involve a new synthesis of these three great learning traditions.

We will achieve this synthesis by multiple means. For example, we will develop for our students a rich array of double majors involving course work in the basic disciplines of the arts and sciences as well as in professional fields. These combined programs will deepen student understanding of the interaction between theory and application. We shall also create contexts in which students on co-op will examine how classroom theory translates into workplace solution. Such experiences will heighten our students' ability to apply basic ideas in multiple settings. Finally, we shall make room for classroom experiences devoted to analyzing and even simulating the social interactions encountered on co-op. These opportunities will greatly increase our students' abilities in the all important workplace skills of team building and collaborative problem-solving.

We are committed to developing the new form of education I have described because we want our students to be ready for an economy and a workplace likely to be characterized by periodic disruption, stiff competition, and constant uncertainty. We want our graduates to have the highest level of skill possible, and at the same time to be flexible enough to adapt themselves and their skills to changing work assignments, multiple jobs, and shifting careers. And if it is true, as Robert Reich and others have suggested, that in our increasingly global economy, those American workers who hope to remain competitive with their foreign counterparts will be those who understand and are able to participate in the process of applying theory to practice, the kind of integrated curriculum we are proposing is imperative. I am convinced that, in re-inventing practice-oriented education along the lines I have outlined, in creating programs that are practical in intent, liberal in spirit, and rigorous in content, Northeastern will meet a major educational need as this nation

enters a new century while offering our students something truly distinctive in American higher education.

While we seek to become a national leader in practice-oriented education, we want also to intensify our scholarly work in the ways that complement our educational goals. As an urban university we have often focused as much on the applications of knowledge as on theory building, and we have supported public service activities through which our faculty directly contribute to the well being of the region. Our achievements in research and public service, however, have typically resulted from the efforts of individual faculty or small groups pursuing particular interest. Our goal over the next several years is to create formal organizational structures and institutional policies that will assure that the work of our scholars over the full range of areas of expertise that we possess is brought systematically to bear on this region's most pressing issues of economic progress, technological development, and social betterment.

The first step in this effort will be the establishment of a new technology transfer infrastructure staffed by individuals charged to make the links between the scholars working in our laboratories and libraries and the non-academic consumers of knowledge in industry, government, and non-profit agencies. Beyond this, we will create new interdisciplinary centers and institutes specifically charged to address contemporary technical and social issues. We will develop workshops, colloquia, and continuing education for active professionals who seek to understand the best current practice in their fields. In our academic policies, we will view the culmination of research not solely in publication but in application, and we will fully recognize the intellectual achievement of those whose research and professional activities address the concerns of business, government agencies, nonprofit institutions, and local communities. To symbolize our commitment to this form of scholarship Northeastern will establish, over the next three years, eight endowed professorships to be awarded to nationally prominent scholars in the various professional fields that we offer whose work is characterized by the fact that it is addressed more to a practitioner than to an academic audience.

So that is what we hope to accomplish in education and in scholarship, all the while continuing to be a true urban university working with our neighbors in Roxbury and the South End and our colleagues in the Boston schools and in the social and governmental agencies of the metropolitan area. I must emphasize, however, here at the end, that Northeastern cannot accomplish all of this alone. There are those universities which – because their focus is national, or because their scholarship emphasizes basic research – can afford to minimize their interaction with the local economy. Northeastern cannot and will not. Our effectiveness in education, in co-op, and in scholarship depends upon an ongoing dialogue and regular interaction with local business, industry, and other sectors of the economy and the city. We want open lines of communication with you, so you have a reliable way of bringing your needs to our attention, and so that we can keep you apprised of new knowledge that might have promising business applications. Likewise, while I am convinced that our plans to combine professional, apprenticeship, and liberal education will place Northeastern on the cutting edge of practice-oriented education, our success will depend on keeping our programs current with the evolving needs of employers and the evolving workplace culture. So dialogue is important for us, and I hope that we can build upon the discussion we are beginning today.

Northeastern University will be one hundred years old next year. For all of those hundred years we have sought to be closely connected to the economic and social needs of this region. In spite of dramatic changes in the economy, in the workplace, and in the nature of work over the century – and in spite of the evolution of Northeastern into the complex university it is today – that link has never been broken. I am here to tell you that under my presidency it will not be broken. We treasure our status as Boston's premier urban university. Whatever challenges await us, Northeastern plans to be here, engaged with this city and working with its enterprises, helping our people and our institutions realize their potential. These are values I believe we share with many of you. I look forward to working with you in the months and years to come.

Thank you.

## 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
- [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](#)

