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State of the university address

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Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

State of the University Address Oct. 6, 2004 Blackman Auditorium

When we gathered last year to consider the state of the university, I observed that we had crossed an invisible line from aspiring to recognition among the nation's top 100 universities to believing that we would achieve that objective

In that talk, I noted dramatic improvements between the fall of 2002 and the fall of 2003 in our admissions selectivity and our students' success in persisting at their studies (see [Slide 1](#)), and I expressed the hope that these two factors would lift us out of the third tier when the next round of rankings was published in August 2004.

Well, as we joyously noted at the beginning of this program, that happened, and this fall we find ourselves, for the first time in Northeastern's history, included among the nation's most highly regarded universities. The slide behind me (see [Slide 1](#)) tracks our ascent over the last three years — with the division between Tier III and the top group indicated by the horizontal line. This next slide (see [Slide 2](#)) displays the change in our rank in the two key arenas: student selectivity, which involves several factors related to the academic level of entering freshmen, and student success, which is a combination of statistics related to students' persistence in their studies. You can see how dramatically our position in these two categories has changed, and that continuing progress is the primary explanation of our steady rise in the overall rankings.

There was, however, something new in the picture this year, and that is clear evidence that our progress is being recognized by professional colleagues around the country. A key factor in our rise into the top tier was our peer rating — our score on a five-point scale for overall institutional quality — given to us by leaders of other national universities. As this slide shows (see [Slide 3](#)), that number jumped from the high 2s to 3.0 for the first time since the rankings began. That peer rating means that we are now among the top 100 universities in the country in the two most telling measures of quality: the academic strength of our

students and our reputation among academic professionals. This is an achievement of which we should all be very proud.

Our sense of increased recognition has been reinforced in recent months by other developments, including the decision by the Chronicle of Higher Education last spring to publish a feature story on our transformation. Since every university seeks this kind of coverage, getting this story is indicative of truly noteworthy change. And now this fall, The Atlantic Monthly has published my article about practice-oriented education, which is really an explanation of why a Northeastern education has become so attractive to so many ambitious and talented young people.

If the new element in our equation last year was a growing confidence that we could achieve our goals, the new element this year is heightened recognition that we are indeed achieving them. That awareness will be an asset to us as we continue our progress toward the top 100.

II.

So, we have much to celebrate as we begin the new year, and our progress in the rankings is only part of the story. This year, once again, we experienced a significant increase in student selectivity, as you can see from this slide (see [Slide 4](#)). This year, once again, a higher proportion of our students in every grade returned to continue their studies than had their counterparts a year ago (see [Slide 5](#)). In fact, if we can sustain these year to year retention rates from last fall's freshmen, we will achieve our goal of a 70 percent graduate rate in 2008, which would be a truly wonderful achievement.

We were also thrilled this fall to witness the completion of two magnificent new facilities — buildings G and H in West Village — that provide additional housing, a new home for the College of Computer and Information Science and new classrooms. Finally, as Provost Ahmed Abdelal has noted, this was the first year of the Academic Investment Plan, which has already enriched our faculty and programs, and will continue to do so in future years. There are many more items I can mention on the list of Northeastern's achievements over the past year. Let me simply express my admiration and thanks to all who contributed to the accomplishments I have mentioned, and to all of you who work day after day to make our university a better place. I feel honored to be part of that continuing effort.

Each year, we give special recognition to units of Northeastern that have made particularly important contributions to our progress. The unit plan achievement awards are substantial budgetary supplements that go to divisions, departments or colleges that have made noteworthy strides in achieving the goals of their unit plans, either through broad advances on a

range of goals or exceptional progress on a particular goal. This year, I am pleased to announce three awards, and I would ask members of those units who are present to stand and be recognized as I mention them.

The first award goes to the College of Criminal Justice, for steady progress across a range of activities based on a well-crafted, comprehensive unit plan. I ask dean Jack Greene and his colleagues in the College of Criminal Justice to stand and be recognized.

The second award goes jointly to the division of enrollment management and student affairs and the division of administration and finance, and specifically to the departments of housing services, residential life, facilities and dining services within those divisions. These units collaborated on significant improvements in residential life that led to dramatically improved satisfaction ratings from our students. I ask Marina Iannalfo, Dan Bourque and Bill Mallon and their colleagues to stand and be recognized.

The third award goes to the College of Computer and Information Science, for excellent progress in building intercollegiate programs, especially ones linking a professional curriculum with the arts and sciences, one of the key dimensions of practice-oriented education at Northeastern. I ask dean Larry Finkelstein and his colleagues to stand and be recognized.

III.

I mentioned a moment ago the value of the increased recognition we are receiving as we continue our march to the top 100. We who have labored to get Northeastern to this point are thrilled by this progress, as we should be. But we also need to be mindful of a simple point that is easily forgotten: While we tend to focus on our progress, others, viewing us from the outside, begin with their sense of who we are now and react to us in terms of what our current position means to them. This afternoon, I invite us all to think about the pattern of recent change at Northeastern from the perspective of two groups who are not longstanding members of our institutional community: first, our neighbors in the communities of Boston closest to campus, and second, our current students as well as high school students who are thinking about college.

IV.

Let us begin with our neighbors. Many, of course, are pleased with the increasing beauty of the campus, and many appreciate the way we welcome them to enjoy our facilities. Many are also appreciative of the ways we improve our community, from our work in the schools, to our activities in the community health centers, to our contributions to community development, to our scholarships for local residents. The list is long and admirable.

But it is also true that our evolution as a residential campus has brought more and more students into the neighborhoods around us with impacts that are not always perceived as positive. The extent of this change has not been adequately documented, but the perception of change is strong and is creating a context for all our interactions with these communities. The events following last year's Super Bowl were particularly distressing, and I hope they will never be repeated.

But the underlying phenomenon of an increased student presence will persist, as will the tensions that that presence inevitably brings. We have seen this with particular clarity in Mission Hill this fall, but I can assure you there are similar concerns among our neighbors in the Fenway and in Roxbury. One effect of all this, as Senior Vice President Larry Mucciolo has noted, has been heightened pressure to build additional on-campus housing for our undergraduates, something we also want to do — and intend to do — to enhance the overall educational experience of our students.

Beyond issues of housing, our heightened impact on the community imposes on all of us, I believe, some special responsibilities. We need to help our neighbors and the elected officials who represent them understand why we are changing and why these changes are good for the city. Telling this story will be a major priority for me this year, and I ask all of you to aid me in this task in your interactions with neighborhood and citizens of the metropolitan area. We also need to work with our neighbors and with city officials to maximize the positive effects of our progress and minimize the negative ones, an effort to which many of you have already contributed. In this work we need the help of our student leaders, who have demonstrated to me an impressive readiness to accept this challenge as part of their contribution to making Northeastern a better university. Our goal of being New England's premier urban university begins with fostering good relationships with our neighbors.

V.

The perspective of our current students and of young people considering coming here and of parents of both groups is also different than that of faculty and staff. When we look at Northeastern from this viewpoint, it is immediately obvious that the progress we have made over the past 15 years matters very little. What matters is what we are now, the quality of the experience we provide now and the expectations we inspire now. And so we must ask ourselves: Given that we are one of the top universities in the country and given that we work hard to communicate to prospective students our particular form of excellence as a student-centered, practice-oriented research university, what promises are we making, and how are we doing in keeping those promises?

Last June, a number of administrative and faculty leaders came together to talk about the promises we make to our students. We talked about two kinds of promises: one having to do with the excellence of the academic experience, and the other involving the richness of extracurricular life. What motivated our discussion was the sense that we need to keep improving both aspects of Northeastern to keep pace with the expectations we are arousing and the growth potential of the students we are attracting.

The discussion of our students' academic experience focused on the quality of our programs, the quality of instruction and on our success in creating strong connections between individual students and individual faculty members. We identified areas of the curriculum, such as general education and the honors program, that need enhancement. We affirmed the value of learning communities, where groups of students come together with members of the faculty to explore shared interests. We were impressed by the early-warning system in freshman English and math that gets extra help quickly to students who need it, and we considered how to extend this initiative to other courses.

Above all, we affirmed the importance of each course, each class and each interaction between a student and a faculty member in keeping our promise of educational excellence. Our goal, we agreed, must be to foster an intense, transformative experience of learning and growth for every one of our students. The provost, the deans and the department chairs will be discussing the challenge of keeping our educational promises with our faculty colleagues in the weeks and months ahead. I ask all members of the faculty to participate actively, and to do whatever you can to elevate the learning experience we offer to the highest possible level.

Our discussion last June regarding our promise of a rich and complete extracurricular life was also fruitful. We concluded that this goal could be advanced through expanded programming in the residence halls. It can also happen through responsive, professional work in each of our support offices. Above all, it can and should happen each time a member of the institutional community has a contact with a student, and that interaction tells the student that their education is our first priority and worthy of the full attention of whoever is involved. Senior Vice President Philomena Mantella and Vice President Edward Klotzbier and their colleagues in enrollment management and student affairs have identified a host of programmatic initiatives to enrich the quality of student life under the rubric of a "We Care" campaign. This is a vitally important effort, and as they reach out to individuals and departments for help, I urge our entire community to be responsive.

No review of our promises to students would be complete without discussion of the biggest promise of all: that is the promise that a Northeastern education will enable students to

combine first-rate classroom studies with high-quality workplace and off-campus experiences. This is the promise that has the greatest value for most of the students who come here.

I referred earlier to my article on practice-oriented education in *The Atlantic Monthly*. I wrote that piece for two reasons. First, I wanted to demonstrate to the reading public that the form of education we emphasize at Northeastern contains all the benefits of a traditional education and something more besides — that it is a powerful pedagogical approach that will enhance learning and growth for many young people, including many of the brightest and most talented. My second motive was to reinforce for our campus community that what we are doing is at the cutting edge of a movement that is gaining traction at many colleges and universities, including some of the top schools in the country. What once made us a maverick now makes us a leader.

But we need to deliver, and we need to remain the leader. As others imitate this or that aspect of what we have done for years, we must keep pushing ourselves to higher levels of excellence. This is why I have given so much emphasis to expanding on our traditional co-op model to stress closer integration of classroom study with workplace experience, and enhanced opportunities to combine professional and specialized majors with liberal learning in the arts and sciences, such as the new programs in computer science that won a unit plan achievement award. These are the two themes of practice-oriented education that are gaining ground around the country, and these are the two dimensions of undergraduate education at Northeastern that hold the keys to our future. I am counting on all members of the classroom and co-op faculty, under the leadership of Provost Abdelal, Vice Provost Malcolm Hill and the college deans, department chairs and co-op coordinators, to continue the effort to enrich and improve our version of practice-oriented education in the year ahead.

VI.

My remarks this afternoon have focused on the university we need to be to fully meet the expectations we have created and the stature we command. That is, of course, where our focus should always be: delivering the high standard of excellence that we promise, because we are educators, because we are proud of our work and because we want the best for every student.

I also believe that keeping our promises is the most effective way to assure continued progress toward the top 100. When we review the challenges that remain to achieve that goal — and believe me, we model our prospects carefully — it is clear that we must make big additional gains in two areas: We must further increase our graduation rates and we must further elevate our academic reputation. In the U.S. News scheme of things, these two factors constitute 50 percent of our overall rating. We have already demonstrated that we can improve both measures, and

continued progress, combined with sustained efforts in other arenas, can get us to our goal.

With respect to graduation rates, let me also remind everyone of a point I have made before: Achieving our goals in the area of student success is the biggest thing we can do to improve our financial position. Every 1 percent increase in our graduation rate is worth \$1 million in our annual operating budget. This is another reason why keeping our promises to the students who are coming to us is so vitally important; keeping those promises is the most powerful thing each of us can do to enhance each student's chance for success, and improved student success will help generate the resources we need to continue improving the quality of our offerings.

Keeping our promises is also what we need to do to further enhance our reputation. Our ability to attract and graduate outstanding students contributes mightily to the way we are regarded by our peers. Achieving the goals we have set for ourselves in the Academic Investment Plan will propel us to new levels of recognition in graduate professional education and research. And fulfilling our aspiration to be the best place in the world to pursue an education that integrates classroom and co-op, and liberal with professional studies, is the most important thing we can do to solidify our claim to recognition among the very best universities in the country.

For my part, I will continue to tell our story, in every available venue — through speeches and articles and publications — and from every podium or rooftop to which I can gain access. We are a great university headed for higher levels of greatness. We are a top-tier university headed for the top 100. We are celebrating a wonderful milestone today, but we not yet where we need to be. I do not know when we will cross that threshold. There may be temporary setbacks. But our direction is clearly up, and we know it is in our power to succeed. So I congratulate you. I thank you. And I ask you to join me in keeping the promise of excellence that will both enrich the experience of our current students and propel us to ultimate success in our institutional goals.