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## State of the university address

Richard M. Freeland (1941-)  
*Northeastern University*

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## Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

### State of the University Address October 7, 2002 Blackman Auditorium

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**NOTE: This speech is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. Clicking on the slides will open a new window.**

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This fall kicks off a special year for Northeastern. Our No. 1 ranking by U.S. News among universities that link classroom study with workplace experience was truly thrilling, and we should all take pride in this recognition, with special acknowledgment to our colleagues in the Department of Cooperative Education. This ranking was only the most dramatic of several developments that give cause for celebration. We should also be delighted in the continuing strength of our admissions effort, as evidenced by the strongest freshman class we have ever admitted.

We applaud wonderful additions to our faculty and staff, beginning with our new provost, Ahmed Abdelal, and including Law Dean Emily Spieler, Nursing Dean Nancy Hoffart, Athletic Director Dave O'Brien, two key department chairs in Journalism's Steve Burgard and Pharmacy Practice's Jack Reynolds, Center for the Study of Sport in Society Director Peter Roby and outstanding professorial appointments including three named chairs, Vladimir Novotny in civil engineering, William Hancock in biotechnology and Joseph Raelin in practice-oriented education. We should celebrate, too, the financial strength that has allowed us to give the

highest salary increases among area colleges this year, at a time when some private institutions are cutting back and our public sector colleagues face an unfunded salary agreement. And how can we not be excited by the magnificence of the new building complex on West Campus, with the elegant Behrakis Health Sciences Center, our seventh new residential hall, and a critically important but neatly concealed parking facility.

Northeastern is a university on the move. We get better every year. We earn more recognition every year. We are making steady progress toward recognition among the top 100 universities in the country. Indeed, the U.S. News rankings that came out last month provide another cause for satisfaction this fall. In the course of today's comments, I will review these results and what they tell us about our position.

But there are two facts that make the year 2002-03 particularly important for every member of this community.

First, the freshmen that we admitted this fall, the class of 2007, constitute the class that carries our hopes for achieving our goal in the area of graduation rates. By 2008, six years from now, 70 percent of this year's freshmen should possess a Northeastern degree. That is our ambitious objective. It is the most important goal of the Action and Assessment Plan. Its achievement must involve all of us. I will speak today about the steps we must take to accomplish this purpose.

The second fact that makes this year particularly important is that we are now in the final year of our transition to a semester calendar. Much good work has been done, but many critical tasks remain. This is another challenge that involves every member of this community, and it is one we must meet at a very high level of effectiveness. I want to talk today about what will be required of us in this arena as well.

So 2002-03 is a benchmark year for Northeastern. At long last, the outside world has confirmed what we have long believed: that we do better than anyone in combining study and work in a practice-oriented

educational experience. And at last we face the moment of truth in two key areas of institutional performance where we must succeed to maintain our steady march toward heightened recognition: student success and semester conversion.

## II

Let me first report on our progress toward top 100 status. As you know, to track our position, we compare ourselves in four critical areas to universities that are already among the top 100. These four criteria are used in one form or another by all academic ranking systems. They include: student selectivity, the academic level of the students we admit; student success, our record of graduating those we admit as freshman; resources, the dollars we spend to support our academic work; and academic reputation, our overall institutional quality as perceived by informed outsiders. The premise of our efforts is simple: If we are competitive with top 100 universities in these four areas, we will be among the strongest universities in the country in any reasonable ranking scheme.

I have already mentioned the strength of our freshman class. This slide [[Click here to see slide](#)] summarizes our progress in admissions over the last five years and the last two years and shows the standard set for us by our comparator universities. As you can see, our applications have risen steadily, far more rapidly than the underlying demographics would explain. We have been particularly successful in increasing applications from well-qualified students, and our preliminary estimate shows a 12-point jump in average SATs over last year, reflecting strong gains in our selectivity. A good story.

This next slide [[Click here to see slide](#)] displays our record in two key measurements of student success, the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate and the six-year graduation rate. Here again the news is encouraging. This fall, we have the highest percentage of last year's freshmen still enrolled that we have ever had, and preliminary data suggest that we actually achieved last June the 56 percent six-year graduation rate that our estimates projected.

The third area by which we compare ourselves to our competitors is resources — the dollars we spend to support our programs. This is a complex arena of analysis involving all sources of revenue and all areas of the operating budget. This next slide **[Click [here](#) to see slide]** shows one way of comparing our resources to those of other universities: total spending per student. The numbers show what our day-to-day experience suggests: that we have less to spend than the universities we seek to emulate and that, when the per-student spending differential is multiplied across our entire student body, we have a large budgetary gap to close to be competitive in the area of resources.

Finally, our academic reputation. This is a special challenge because it is a vague concept reflecting many factors, because it is typically measured through opinion surveys of poorly informed individuals, and because there is inevitably a lapse in time between the changes that occur at any institution and broad awareness of those changes. Indeed, this slide **[Click [here](#) to see slide]** shows that despite the very real progress we have made on many fronts there has been no measurable change in our reputational score.

So that is my report in the four key areas where we track our progress toward the top 100. We also pay attention, of course, to how our record impacts our standing in the annual U.S. News rankings, and the next two slides summarize that result.

This table **[Click [here](#) to see slide]** records recent changes in our percentile position among national universities in the seven categories of assessment used by U.S. News. The three-year change is shown in the column on the far right, and the categories are grouped to correspond to the four areas we use in our institutional self-assessment. As you can see, we are making excellent progress in the three categories related to our students — graduation and retention, selectivity, and graduation rate performance. We are doing less well in the categories related to resources, especially resources that directly support instruction; our reputational score is unchanged, and our overall

position has improved steadily but incrementally.

This next slide also tells an encouraging story [[Click here to see slide](#)]. The left-hand axis corresponds to the number of universities in the U.S. News rankings, and the horizontal lines show the break points between the four tiers in which the universities are grouped. The bars display our standing in each of the seven categories of evaluation. As you can see, we are already in tier two in three of the categories; we are close to tier two in another two categories; and we have significant distance to close in the remaining two.

I believe the statistics I have just reviewed make it clear that our goals are achievable. We are within striking distance of tier two in the U.S. News rankings. We are making steady progress toward the top 100. To be sure, there are challenges in these numbers as well. Although we have improved our position in the areas of student selectivity and student success, we have a long way still to go. We need to maintain our focus on steady improvement in both these areas. I shall say more about graduation rates in a few moments.

At the same time, this year's numbers tell us that we need to attend more effectively to the two areas of assessment where we have not made measurable progress: our reputation and our resource base. There is not space in my remarks this afternoon to mention all the things we are doing in these two areas. Let me simply say that I and other members of the university leadership are focused on these issues. We have already taken steps that will improve our position in both categories.

In the area of resources, for example, we are making good progress on the Leadership Campaign, under the guiding hand of Senior Vice President [for Institutional Advancement] Bob Cunningham with great help from both volunteer leaders and our development professionals; and with last year's salary increases we have taken an important step toward improving our position in the area of faculty support. In the area of reputation, the strong appointments we are making, the new programs we have initiated and our

increasing success in winning awards for sponsored projects are adding greatly to our underlying strength.

We shall tell our story more aggressively than ever through expansion of the marketing effort that we initiated last spring under the leadership of Vice President [for University Relations Sandra] King. There is more to say on all these topics, and I would be glad to comment on any of them in more detail during the discussion that follows these remarks.

### III

I want to focus today, however, on something of more fundamental importance than the metrics of the U.S. News rankings or even the programmatic initiatives we have taken to improve our position. That is our collective commitment to accomplishing the purposes we have set for ourselves.

In their landmark work on successful American companies, "In Search of Excellence," Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman make this simple but profound observation: "Excellent companies live their commitment to people ... and their insistence on ... initiative" from their entire work force, not just their highly paid executives. Such companies are characterized, the authors write, by a special "intensity [cutting across the entire organization] ... stemming from strongly held beliefs" in the value of the work being done and from an obsessive determination to "get the basics right." In the end, in Peters and Waterman's view, success is not chiefly about strategy or structure or charismatic leadership, but about the enthusiasm and dedication of an entire organization to doing the job at the highest possible level.

What Peters and Waterman found for successful companies applies with equal force to Northeastern University. In the end, it will be the effort and dedication of many individuals that determine our success in achieving excellence as a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban. Faculty members and co-op coordinators, one by one, providing their students with the richest, most rigorous educational experiences imaginable. Staff members, one by one, making sure that the

support they provide to students and to faculty meets the highest standard of professionalism and service. I am able to report solid progress toward our goals only because so many members of our community have dedicated themselves passionately to achieving the goals that we have set for ourselves. Today I want to salute a few of our local heroes.

Last fall we announced a program of financial grants called Unit Plan Achievement Awards. This program promised significant budgetary increments to academic and administrative departments that do particularly good jobs of crafting unit plans that support the university's Action and Assessment Plan and then of implementing those plans effectively. Last month, I was pleased to announce four winners in the first round of Unit Plan Achievement Awards [[Click here to see slide](#)].

The first group of recipients was our terrific team in Admissions. I have already mentioned our progress in this area. Our admissions and enrollment services professionals have done a superb job in reaching out across the Northeast and beyond to attract stronger student applicants, achieve greater geographic and ethnic diversity, and work with each of the colleges to meet specific enrollment goals. We are greatly in debt to the entire Admissions and Enrollment Services unit led by Ronné Patrick, Art Mahoney and Gregg Meyer, and I would like you all to stand and be recognized.

Our second award went to one of our student support units, the Lane Health Center.

A key goal for several years has been to improve the quality of services we provide to students. Our colleagues at Lane have taken this charge to heart. At Lane, unit-wide planning has led to a new electronic medical record system; better records management; improved response time to students needing attention and a heightened emphasis on staff development and training. I would ask Lance Hopkins and his colleagues to stand and be recognized.

It is our academic programs, of course, that will ultimately play the primary role in our success, and two of our colleges have done extraordinary jobs in

setting unit goals and making significant progress toward attaining them.

The College of Criminal Justice has done particularly well in developing and implementing a comprehensive unit plan that touches every aspect of the university's aspiration: student selectivity, student success, undergraduate and graduate curriculum enhancement, research productivity and co-op job quality. I ask Dean Jack Greene and his colleagues to stand and be recognized.

The College of Engineering has also achieved marked progress through careful planning and disciplined action, making significant strides in virtually all of its unit plan goals. Engineering has set the Northeastern standard for progress in the U.S. News rankings, rising from 74th to 63rd at the undergraduate level and 71st to 55th at the graduate level. Dean Al Soyster, I would ask you and your colleagues to stand and be recognized.

So we have progress to celebrate and people to applaud.

I know there are many other members of this community who are contributing to our progress at a high level. I wish I could thank each of you personally, and I look forward to recognizing additional units and individuals with additional unit plan achievement awards in the future.

#### **IV**

I mentioned at the beginning of this talk that the current year is special for two reasons: the fact that we have now admitted the class that should achieve a graduation rate of 70 percent and the fact that we are in the final year of transition to a semester calendar. In the last part of my talk, I would like to enlarge briefly on these two objectives.

We have talked a great deal about graduation rates over the last few years. I believe everyone in this community understands the significance of our graduation rate as a measure of how well we serve students, as a contributor to our academic reputation and as a factor in determining our financial health. If

we had to single out one goal in our Action and Assessment Plan as especially important it would be our determination to greatly improve institutional performance in this area, not by making things easy for our students, but by inspiring and supporting them in negotiating a demanding academic experience. I have been pleased to note our steady progress. In 1996-97, the first year of my presidency, we graduated 40 percent of those we had admitted six years earlier. By June 2002 that number had increased to 56 percent, a truly remarkable achievement of which we should all feel very proud.

Yet 56 percent is a long way from 70 percent, and our rate of improvement, impressive as it is, does not allow us to confidently predict success in achieving our goal in the time we have allotted ourselves. So this part of my talk is an appeal to every member of our community. There is no one thing we can do at the institutional level to assure each Northeastern student the greatest possible chance to graduate. The work must be done all across the organization, through every member of our community making sure that every interaction with a student occurs at the highest level of quality. It also means helping students who are encountering difficulties in areas unrelated to our particular responsibilities either by assisting them ourselves or making sure they get connected to someone who can provide support to them [[Click here to see slide](#)].

We are especially fortunate as we maintain our focus on student success in the dedicated work of our Retention Task Force led by Senior Vice President [for Enrollment Management and Student Life] Philomena Mantella. This group contains representatives from every part of the university — faculty, university administration, the deans' offices, student services. The task force has put together a comprehensive program of initiatives to enhance the experience of all our students. The task force will be communicating its plans to each of you, and I would ask you to participate fully in the work they have outlined. I ask the members of the Retention Task Force to stand so that everyone can see you acknowledge the important work you are doing.

The challenge of student success is directly related to the challenge of semester conversion [**Click [here to see slide](#)**]. We have promised our students that the conversion process will be seamless for them. The students should experience the educational benefits of the change while encountering a minimum of conversion-related difficulties. This will require a major effort on all our parts, because the amount of change will actually be quite massive. Every program, every course is being revised, so there will be new requirements. The relationship of co-op to the curriculum is changing. The class schedule is being altered. There will be new systems for registration and billing. Virtually every transaction between student and university will be altered.

So there will be lots of potential problems and lots of room for error. Students will need help, and we all need to help each other help them. Important tasks, like completing the design of integrated learning models, remain to be accomplished. We need to be all over these challenges. If we do not manage this final year of transition well, we risk a significant setback in the area of retention and graduation, and we risk missing an opportunity to strengthen our program that will not come again. This is one of those occasions in the life of an organization when failure is simply not an option.

All afternoon I have been asking people to stand so that we can recognize those who are leading us in key areas of activity. I confess I am at a loss as to whom to ask to stand when it comes to semester conversion. Many have played key roles so far in administrative and governance capacities — Executive Vice Provost [Coleen] Pantalone, the associate deans, the members of various governance committees, numerous academic and administrative departments. Everyone's work is being affected one way or another. I should truly ask everyone to stand because we will succeed only if everyone contributes. I won't do that, but I will remind us of a recent experience that we should bear in mind as we address the challenges of semester conversion in the months ahead.

We all remember the summer of 2000. That was when we realized that we would be enrolling a

freshman class in a few months containing 600 more students than we had planned for. We knew there would not be enough beds, enough classes, enough seats in those classes, enough faculty to teach. We worried about long lines in the dining halls, and inconveniences with our administrative systems, and a poor experience for this large group of first-year students. So what did we do? We turned to the task. We identified the needs. We took them on one by one, and when the freshmen arrived they hardly noticed anything unusual. Indeed, that class had our highest ever freshman-to-sophomore retention rate and most freshmen expressed a high level of satisfaction with their experience. In my State of the University address that fall, I thanked dozens of individuals whose dedication achieved this impressive result.

We need a similar, even greater effort now to finish the job of semester conversion. So I must ask you all, once again, to understand the importance of the challenge, to rise to the occasion as I know you are capable of doing, and achieve another big win for Northeastern at a moment when a win is absolutely necessary. We do know about winning after all. We are No. 1 in the country at what we do.

This is the time to show what that means.

I have talked at length today about some of our immediate challenges. I have done so because of the significance of the work we must do in the next several months and years. But we also know that this work has importance far beyond semester conversion, or beyond our goals for student success, beyond even our effort to improve our position in the national rankings of universities. We are engaged in the process of making a great university even greater. We are writing a new chapter in the history not only of Northeastern, but of American higher education. In such circumstances, Peters and Waterman wrote of exceptional organizations, every employee "becomes a pioneer, an experimenter, a leader. The institution," they wrote, "provides guiding belief and creates a sense of excitement, a sense of being a part of the best, a sense of producing something of quality that is generally valued ... each individual is expected to stand out and contribute, to be distinctive [knowing

that the work] is part of something great.”

The stakes for us are high. The challenges are daunting indeed. But the potential is inspiring. Let us be about this work with good cheer, clear in our commitment and confident of our success.