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Freeland Speeches

Richard M. Freeland

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State of the university address

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Northeastern
UNIVERSITY

Office of the President

SPEECHES OF RICHARD M. FREELAND

State of the University Address
October 8, 1998
Blackman Auditorium

Thank you, Professor [Charles] Ellis, Vice President [Larry] Mucciolo and Provost [David] Hall for those encouraging reports.

It is now my honor, as president, to review the current state of the university and identify the major issues we face in the year ahead. Preparing these remarks is always a challenge. It is like Tolstoy's dilemma in recounting Napoleon's invasion of Russia. How, the novelist wondered toward the end of "War and Peace," could he explain the great historical events he sought to portray. Thousands of individuals were involved, each possessed of free will, each acting to some degree autonomously. Yet the events themselves had a kind of order that invited historians to describe complex social processes in terms of disembodied abstractions rather than individual strivings.

We are a university constituted of over 161 departments, both academic and administrative. Laboring within these departments are nearly 750 faculty and more than 1,500 staff, as well as hundreds of part-time faculty, staff and graduate assistants. When we speak of Northeastern University, when we celebrate the accomplishments of our first century, we use an institutional abstraction to stand for all these people, all doing their own

work, yet all part of a collectivity that, like Tolstoy's army, does possess an independent life.

In preparing for today, I have been acutely conscious that your individual efforts range far beyond what I can mention. All I can do is thank each of you for your work every day while regretting that I cannot do justice to your contributions.

Yet your exertions, taken together, have brought Northeastern to a position of remarkable strength. We admitted this fall the best prepared and most highly selected freshman class in a generation. We increased the diversity of our new students. Our freshman-to-sophomore retention rate is the highest ever recorded. And we far exceeded our goals in enrolling new transfers. I want to thank Vice Provost [Jean] Eddy, admissions director Alan Kines and financial aid director Mike Wildeman and all their colleagues in enrollment management and in the colleges who have contributed to these results.

Enrollment strength equals financial strength, and, as Vice President Mucciolo has reported, our budgets should be stable in the year ahead. This stability depends, of course, on continued discipline, and I want to express appreciation to those with leading responsibilities in this area, comptroller Bill Kneeland, treasurer Joe Murphy, planning director Edna Seaman, chair of the committee on funding priorities Jeff Born and all the deans, directors and chairs who have been managing so well in an atmosphere of continuing financial constraint.

We start this fall with new strength in our leadership as well. Our new board chair, Neal Finnegan, is one of the principal architects of our resurgence since the early 1990s. I am greatly pleased that we have now in place a full team of senior vice presidents, with the wonderful talents of David Hall and Larry Mucciolo joined with those of [senior vice president for development] Dick Meyer, who provided such inspired direction for our successful Centennial Campaign.

We have new strength in other positions: Robert Weir as vice president for information services; Jim Stellar as dean of arts and sciences; Leon Zaborowski as vice provost for adult and

continuing education and dean of University College; Donnie Perkins as dean and director of affirmative action and diversity; Linda Allen as registrar; and Pat Meservey as special assistant to the president. In addition, we are well served by excellent appointments in several interim positions: Richard Porter as vice president for cooperative education, and deans Patrick Plunkett in Bouvé, Carole Shea in nursing and Daniel Givelber in law. We also start the fall with five newly named academic department chairs, 46 new faculty members and 83 additions to our staff.

I extend the thanks of the institution to all those who served on search committees to bring this new talent to Northeastern, and to vice president Kater Pendergast and her staff in human resources who do so much to support the recruitment process.

Finally, I wish to thank three individuals who have recently chosen to step down from their positions: vice president Bob Vozzella and acting dean Kristin Woolever in cooperative education and dean Jamie Fox, who is beginning his last year as dean of criminal justice.

Our campus becomes more attractive each year. As out new dormitory rises in West Village, we are advancing additional residential projects as rapidly as possible. Those who administer our residential life and student affairs programs - vice president Karen Rigg, dean Ron Martel, director Mary Langlie - have been working overtime to respond to the need for more housing and to enrich the quality of campus life. Planning is under way for the new health sciences building supported by Trustee [George] Behrakis' generous gift. I want to thank all of those who work so hard to develop and maintain this campus - vice president [for business] Jack Martin and his team, along with vice president Vin Lembo, [government relations] director Tom Keady, [African-American studies associate] professor Joe Warren and the leaders of our physical master planning effort, [engineering] dean Allen Soyster and [art and architecture associate] professor George Thrush.

We are making progress in keeping Northeastern technologically current as well. The new computer-assisted

learning center in engineering and the Frager Nursing Learning Laboratory represent state-of-the-art facilities. University College is offering this fall the university's first-ever fully Internet based courses. I want to extend special thanks to those who are devoting their energies to enhancing our technological resources, especially the members of the University Technology Council, chaired by Carol Chamberlain, and the policy subcommittee of the NUway project, working with Norma Knight.

Our deans and faculty, of course, carry the primary responsibility for our academic work, in the classroom and in the library and laboratory. Evidence of our seriousness about education abounds, from the wide-ranging innovation taking place through our ACE [Academic Common Experience] initiative, to the ELMO project, to Project Smile, to curricular revisions in several of the colleges. At the same time, our research productivity continues to improve, as evidenced by a 15 percent increase in external funding between 1997 and 1998. My congratulations to all the scholars who are carrying Northeastern's banner and to vice provost Ron Hedlund, who is doing so much to strengthen our research administration.

These academic accomplishments are being registered through improved recognition in external ratings: in the U.S. News and World Report rankings, our graduate engineering program has climbed to 65th; our graduate nursing program to 53d; our pediatric nurse practitioner program to 22d; and our part-time MBA program is tied for 21st. Success magazine calls our graduate entrepreneur program one of the "hot up-and-comers," ranking it 30th in the nation. Our finance faculty have been the 25th most productive scholarly group in general finance in the nation, according to a recent study by the Journal of Financial Education, and we ranked 25th in corporate finance in the same study. Our electrical and computer engineering department is in the top 10 percent nationally in funded research. In the overall institutional rankings published by U.S. News and World Report this fall, our academic reputation climbed from 2.1 to 2.8 on a 5-point scale, impressive progress that nonetheless makes clear how far we have still to go.

Recognition in the form of financial support is equally important, and I am pleased to report solid progress on that front as well. Last year, a record 26,484 donors made contributions to the Annual Giving Program. Total private gifts for the year remained steady at $27.5 million, a remarkable achievement in the final year of a campaign. My thanks to the hard-working members of our development office as well as to the college deans for their contributions to this success. We will be looking to the deans to play an even larger role as we prepare during the months ahead for the next campaign.

Our resurgent athletics program is also part of our success story. Last year, six of our teams - three men's, three women's - completed their seasons with national rankings, and the Marino Recreation Center was rated one of the best fitness facilities in the country. Congratulations to [athletics] director Ian McCaw and his colleagues.

All of this is an exciting story, and that story is getting out. The annual Kaplan/Newsweek guide to colleges included us as one of five featured universities with distinctive missions. The Christian Science Monitor highlighted our resurgence in an article last month. And, of course, we had wonderful recognition from the local press on our centennial, especially the front-page piece in the Boston Globe. My thanks to [University Relations] director Charles Coffin, [public relations director] Janet Hookailo and the professionals in our Office of University Relations, whose daily work makes these stories happen.

II

So we enter the new year and a new century with rising fortunes.

This is both welcome and reassuring for a university that has so recently struggled with adversity. But we aspire not merely to maintain ourselves. Having survived, we seek to flourish. This is no time to relax. It is a time to grasp new possibilities.

Opportunities for progress have emerged gradually as we have recovered from the crisis of the early 1990s and as the reality of

a "smaller and better" Northeastern has taken shape. A year ago, seeking to guide our efforts to realize the "better" part of the "smaller/better" formula, I used my state-of-the-university comments to outline a vision appropriate for this period in our history. Describing Northeastern as a "national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban," I suggested that our surest path to heightened achievement and recognition is to attain excellence in each dimension of this five-part mantra.

In the months since that talk, through the decennial re-accreditation process of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, many of you have worked to elaborate and extend that tentative formulation of last September by turning the five themes of the mantra into specific goals and plans. I want to thank all who served on the reaccreditation committees, especially [executive vice provost] Coleen Pantalone, who bore the primary responsibility, [economics professor] Steve Morrison, who chaired the steering committee, and everyone who contributed to this effort.

The reaccreditation report summarizes the challenges before us. I would draw particular attention to Volume I, which contains recommendations for action. Copies of the report have been distributed to all departments and placed in the library. It can also be found on-line at the Northeastern homepage <www.neu.edu/accreditation/final>.

Over the next several weeks, as we anticipate a late October visit by the reaccreditation team, there will be several forums to discuss the report. I urge you to participate in these sessions. This is in no way a standard, bureaucratic reaccreditation exercise; it is an attempt to lay the foundations for our future. Please do your part to make sure those foundations are sound.

Good as it is, the reaccreditation report is at this point only words on a page. For it to become institutionally meaningful, the purposes it outlines must inform the priorities of every Northeastern college and department. That is the work of this year, and the major vehicles for accomplishing it on the academic side of the house are the long-range planning

processes of the colleges and the unit planning activities of the departments.

We are asking each academic unit this year, as you pursue the unit planning process, to consider how you can contribute to the goals set forth in the reaccreditation document: How can you enhance our national standing; how enrich our research achievement; how strengthen our service to students; how reflect our orientation toward practice; how enrich our urban character.

It may not be appropriate for each unit to pursue every goal; but each can contribute to some of them, and in the aggregate every college should help us achieve them all.

The challenges set forth in the reaccreditation report should guide our administrative departments as well. In student services, in financial affairs, in physical plant, in information services, there are ways you can help Northeastern achieve excellence in some aspects of the mantra. We must become a high-performance organization in everything we do, and each unit's contribution to our fundamental academic and institutional purposes is a critical measure of that unit's effectiveness.

So we have work to do this year all across the university to carry forward the effort that has been so well begun through the reaccreditation committees. I look forward to having the chance, when we meet a year from now, to summarize the progress we have made.

III

I have stressed my belief that the best way to fulfill our potential lies in pursuing the five dimensions of the mantra. But within this formulation there is one phrase that particularly characterizes us and evokes our special genius. That phrase is "practice-oriented." I'd like to take a few moments to discuss the importance of these words, and to say why I think we have an historic opportunity to be a national leader in "practice-oriented education," and also to outline what we must do this year in two

critical areas - co-op and intercollegiate programming - to seize the time.

Let me begin by acknowledging the obvious: Northeastern has always done work that can be described as "practice-oriented." We have devoted ourselves to cooperative education and professional education for a century. Our College of Arts and Sciences offers many programs that prepare students for the workplace and much of our research focuses on the applications of scholarly knowledge. So what is new? Isn't the phrase "practice-oriented" just different words to describe what we have been doing all along?

The answer to that question is "yes" and "no." Indeed, I have been using this phrase precisely because it resonates with values we have long espoused while also suggesting something fresh, something changed. The words "practice-oriented" are meant to sound both continuous with and different from the great academic traditions we celebrated during our centennial, to speak to a magnificent history as well as to the conditions and potential of a new era.

Let me be specific about the changes in our circumstances that call for new thinking at Northeastern. Two kinds of change are especially important. First are those to which we must respond as professionals because they have implications for our educational work. Second are changes in our competitive environment that infuse the moment with both hope and hazard.

Nothing is more important to our ability to fulfill our potential in practice-oriented learning than our program of cooperative education. We have all become aware in recent years of the altered co-op experience of today's students. A program that once served chiefly to help students pay their bills has evolved into one that serves primarily to enrich their learning.

Virtually none of our students can cover their tuition costs with co-op earnings, and for many those earnings are needed to make ends meet during the co-op period itself.

We have, of course, recognized this shift of co-op from an

"earning" experience to a "learning" experience, and we have taken substantive steps to respond to this new reality. In particular, we have concluded that we must break down the walls that traditionally have separated co-op from classroom and seek a greater integration of these two parts of the Northeastern experience. We are pointed in the right direction, but we must acknowledge that the steps taken so far have been partial and experimental. The revised nature of co-op is the first change with which we must contend, and we have a long way to go in responding to its implications.

A second change that speaks to our responsibilities as educators involves the workplace itself. Our graduates today enter a world markedly different from the one that awaited their parents. Today's students join industries driven by exploding technologies. They enter a labor force more diverse and international than ever. They encounter organizations that are less hierarchical and more dependent on teamwork than in the past. And they face a global economy in which technical positions are being exported while opportunities at home require conceptual, analytic and problem-solving skills.

These changes have transformed the demands on professional education. Our professional colleges are challenged to continually upgrade their offerings. This is vital; it is the basic work of staying competitive. But enhancing our professional offerings within collegiate boundaries is not enough. Students preparing for the workplace today often need to work across disciplinary lines that transcend any one of our professional colleges, and all our students need the liberal arts and sciences as much as they need professional preparation. Our nationally recognized approach to general education, the Academic Common Experience, recognizes the latter reality, so it is very important, but we need to extend the connections between professional and liberal education to the major as well. The new Northeastern should offer a rich array of double majors, dual majors and major-minor sequences that cut across collegiate boundaries and make possible a full experience of both professional and liberal education.

The two themes of change I have just outlined - building bridges

between classroom and co-op and between liberal and professional education - constitute two critical innovations we must undertake to prepare current students for adult life. It is for this reason that I say we have a professional responsibility to undertake these improvements.

I mentioned a moment ago that there is another set of developments to which we must pay attention. These are changes in our competitive environment. Some new forces are working in our favor. In particular, contemporary students are far more inclined than were their parents to view college as a preparation for their careers. Even at Ivy League campuses, where most students have traditionally gone directly to graduate school, substantial majorities of graduates are postponing advanced education and entering the workforce. National statistics on college enrollments reveal a strong trend toward professional fields.

Embedded in these patterns is a great opportunity for Northeastern. Preparing for the realities of adult, working life is what we are all about. Our leadership in cooperative education gives us a great advantage in attracting today's undergraduates. I believe, in fact, that Northeastern is positioned as never before to enroll capable students from across the country and around the world. But such students will demand the best we can give them. They will not be content with curricular structures that force them to choose between professional preparation and liberal learning or with co-op experiences that are not incorporated into the learning process.

We will not realize our potential unless we build the bridges between co-op and classroom and between our professional programs and the arts and sciences that I have been describing. Fully implemented, these changes would constitute a new model of education, a model perfect for our times that can properly be called "practice-oriented." No other institution is doing this the way we can do it. No institution is more capable than we of asserting national leadership in this field.

But there is a threatening side to this moment of opportunity. The patterns I have been describing have been observed by other

colleges and universities, and they are moving quickly to respond. Internships are exploding in American higher education as students demand the opportunity to combine classroom learning with real-world experience. Cooperative education is changing. More and more campuses are offering some form of co-op, and established programs are experimenting with new approaches. Our historic position as a national leader in co-op is by no means assured. We find ourselves competing for co-op placements with other colleges and universities. Other universities claim that they, too, offer students work integrated learning - maybe at a lower cost, maybe with a shorter time to degree.

So we must change. We must change to serve our students better. We must change to serve the employers who work with us. We must change to sustain our position in work-integrated learning. We must change because we have a great opportunity to lead a national movement toward practice-oriented education.

We need to seize this opportunity. We need to seize it now. We must change now. Last June, the university's entire leadership team - the deans, vice provosts and vice presidents - spent two days reflecting on Northeastern's current position. The most striking outcome of those discussions was agreement that assuring the quality of our cooperative education program must be our top priority this year. Co-op, we agreed, is our most distinctive basis for claiming national attention. We must be the quality leader in this field.

So the first year of our second century must be a time to stretch toward our full potential in practice-oriented education and especially in cooperative education. At the center of this effort will be the process to which Provost Hall alluded in his remarks - implementing a wide-ranging program of change in co-op that involves not just the co-op department and division but the collegiate faculties as well. In the weeks and months ahead Provost Hall, [co-op] vice president Porter and the college deans will be calling upon you to get involved in this effort. I urge you to give them your full support.

As we move to strengthen co-op, we must also address the other

key dimension of practice-oriented education: forging links between the colleges and between our professional offerings and the arts and sciences. Many interesting and worthy initiatives are in various stages of development. Other possibilities are waiting to be pursued. I urge all of you, once again under the leadership of Provost Hall and the deans, to build these new bridges which will be pathways to an enhanced education for all our students.

IV

I have spoken at length about the challenge of forging a new model of undergraduate education not because we do not have other important work to do; on the contrary, every facet of the mantra commands our attention, and your efforts to advance these themes will determine Northeastern's long-term strength. Moreover, beyond the directions defined by the mantra are individual and departmental purposes that are important, too. Indeed, in stressing today a limited number of institutional goals, I do not mean to impose a rigid formula of purpose on every unit of this university. There must be room for each department to define for itself distinctive qualities that reflect the character of your unit and your field of endeavor. Unity and diversity are not at odds at Northeastern. They are complementary values. We will be strengthened if we are all pulling together to realize shared values, and we will be further strengthened if, within the common enterprise, there is room for individuality, creativity and entrepreneurial inventiveness.

And here, of course, we encounter one other characteristic of Northeastern that we have celebrated during this centennial year. That is our character as a community. Northeastern is unusual among universities. Centrifugal forces tend to dominate modern academic institutions; the center rarely holds. Yet here there is an unusual degree of institutional affiliation. So many have had long careers here. So many work here that went to school here. So many send their children here. For many of us, this is not just a job, and not just a workplace, but an important source of the meaning of our lives.

At the beginning of these remarks, I mentioned Tolstoy's

reflective essay on history at the end of "War and Peace." In those famous passages, Tolstoy describes the politics of central Europe and the movements of armies, taking care that we understand the maneuvers of the diplomats and the strategies of the generals. But in the end, he draws us into the experience of individual citizens and soldiers, and he urges us to see history as the collective consequence of actions by autonomous men and women, each pursuing a personal vision, a unique destiny, within the framework of a larger whole. Without such individual efforts, such private dreams, he reminds us, nothing happens. Victory will not come. History does not happen.

We have reminded ourselves of this fact as we have celebrated our centennial: Without the exertions of individuals over the past century, Northeastern would not have happened. Nothing that we have remembered would be here unless some individual, some one, had taken the trouble to cause it to become. Many of these actors are known to you. You can look at a building or a program or a service or a part of the campus and you can say, "I know who put that there," or even, "I know what I did to put that there." And this knowledge of collective result arising from individual effort is our greatest strength as we reach for a new level of achievement in our new century.

So I ask each of you, as you begin carrying out your particular responsibilities this year, as you set priorities for your departments and offices, think about how you and your colleagues can help us achieve our potential as a national research university that does scholarship to enhance people's lives, that is centrally concerned with students and that is a welcoming, diverse contributor to our urban community, and think, above all else this year, about how you can advance the great work of forging here on Huntington Avenue a new model of practice-oriented education to better serve our students and to project the unique value of this university in vibrant Northeastern colors for all the world to see.

Thank you very much.

Other addresses:

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
- Address to the Northeastern Corporation, May 28, 1997
- Remarks to the Boston Chamber of Commerce, April 4, 1997
- Address to the University Community, February 27, 1997
- Inaugural Address, January 17, 1997

1996

- State of the University Address, September 30, 1996
- Acceptance Remarks to the University Community, May 29, 1996

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