

Northeastern University

Freeland Speeches Richard M. Freeland

September 28, 2005

State of the university address

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Recommended Citation

Freeland~(1941-), Richard~M., "State~of~the~university~address~"~(2005).~Freeland Speeches.~Paper~31.~http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10002030

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Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

State of the University Address September 28, 2005 Blackman Auditorium

Colleagues and friends, good afternoon. This is the 10th time I have had the privilege of reporting to you on the state of Northeastern University. It will also be the last time. So this is an emotional occasion for me as I reflect on all we have been through together and all we have accomplished. However, my focus today and in the months ahead will be on the work of the year. There will be a time to say goodbye and for me to thank you all for your dedication to the University and personal support of me. But that time is not now. I have things I still hope to accomplish and the University needs us all to stay focused on the goals we have set for ourselves.

Ι.

We should begin the year by reminding ourselves of the progress we made during 2004-05. (Slide 1: US News Rankings). The headline, of course, was our continued climb toward the top 100: from 150 five years ago, to 142 four years ago, to 127, to 120, to 115 this year. Even more important, this year's ranking strengthened our position within the top tier, and did so based on impressive improvements in admissions selectivity, graduation and retention rates, and investment in our instructional programs. (Slide 2: Ranks for individual metrics.) All these numbers represent years of hard work by many in this community, and it is gratifying to see that collective effort can achieve solid results.

Even more gratifying than the abstract metrics of our progress are the educational and scholarly achievements these numbers represent. Last year's freshman class was the strongest we have ever admitted, as were the prior years' classes, each in turn. (Slide 3: Student quality, Fall 2005) This fall's freshmen continue that pattern, with average SATs rising another 15 points to 1225, and modest increments in mean grade point average and high school class rank. We all feel the quickening of creative energy that these fabulous students are bringing to campus. And we rejoice that heightened intellectual vitality has been combined with impressive progress in diversity. A quarter of this year's entering students come from communities of color. Once again our team in admissions services, led by Philly Mantella, Ronné

Patrick Turner, and Seamus Harreys, has achieved a remarkable result.

The progress in student success tells an equally impressive story. The percentage of each class returning for the next year continues to rise. Our six-year graduation rate continues to improve. (Slide 4: Student success.) These numbers tell us we are delivering on our promise to do everything we can to help our students succeed.

Last year we launched a major effort to ensure that our performance in every aspect of our work is commensurate with the expectations our promises engender. This community is carrying out that mandate. I thank and commend you all.

I am especially thrilled this year at the gains in our ranking for financial support of the academic program. Our jump of 39 places reflects our Academic Investment Plan to expand the tenured and tenure-track faculty in key fields, strengthen graduate professional programs, build targeted centers of research excellence and increase financial support for all aspects of our academic work. Through the leadership of Provost Abdelal and the deans we are seeing the results of these investments in an influx of wonderfully talented faculty, a heightened percentage of small classes, exciting new academic programs and stunning achievements by our senior researchers.

The physical progress of the campus is no less impressive than our academic achievements. We all take pleasure in the fine new buildings we are adding on West Campus under the supervision of Senior Vice President Mucciolo and his team. Last year it was buildings G and H, the latter of which has won our third nationally significant award for design excellence in three years. This year we will open the final new building on West Campus, containing housing for freshmen in the honors program, more classrooms and, of course, a new home for the John D. O'Bryant African-American Institute.

I am also pleased that we are nearing completion of the all-important \$200 million Leadership Campaign. With hard work by many volunteers and advancement staff led by Senior Vice President Cunningham, along with governance leaders and members of the campus community, and with wonderful generosity by many members of our support community, the campaign now stands at \$192 million, by far the largest amount raised by any campaign in our history. Many of you have contributed with both your dollars and your efforts, and I am deeply grateful. Our goal is to finish the campaign this year. I hope that those of you who have not yet contributed will do so in the next few months.

Finally, as we count our new year's blessings, let me welcome all new members of the faculty and staff. I wish I could greet each of you individually. I do especially want to welcome two new vice presidents, alum Jack Moynihan in Alumni Relations and Bill Bartolini in Development. I am also thrilled that we have

appointed one of our own, former electrical engineering professor Paul Zavracky, as dean of the new School of Technological Entrepreneurship.

11.

So, we begin this year with wonderful momentum. Yet we are far from satisfied.

The top-100 goal is still in front of us. Our aspiration remains a work in progress, and I will be devoting much of my energy in the months ahead to those aspects of our work that are most critical to our continued ascent.

I am mindful, for example, that we took a small step back this year in the reputational dimension of the rankings. I do not attach much substantive significance to this fact. We all know that the peer rating system is notoriously soft and that institutional reputations tend to lag qualitative change. But our score does tell us something about what others know and think about Northeastern, and this year's dip reminds us that we need to be aggressive in informing our colleagues across the country about our dramatic progress. I ask you to join me in this effort through whatever communications networks are available to you.

I am mindful, too, that despite our impressive progress in the arena of student success, our overall graduation rate is not yet where we want it to be and that a continued focus on supporting our students through to graduation is needed. As we set unit-by-unit goals for this year, I will be speaking with each of the senior vice presidents and vice presidents about the contributions their divisions can make to this vital effort.

There are other arenas of institutional work that need attention as we continue the drive toward top 100. Alumni participation in annual giving has slipped every year for five years; we need to turn this around. The ratio of full-time to part-time faculty needs to be improved. We need to keep making progress in admissions selectivity and in expanding non-tuition sources of revenue. In short, across many parts of the university there is work to be done to keep us moving forward, and I ask you all, in your various areas of responsibility, to stay focused on these challenges.

III.

As we continue to advance in the rankings, we need also to step back from the year-by-year challenges I have been discussing and to realize that we have arrived at a fundamentally new place. Last year we celebrated our arrival into the top tier. This year we improved our position despite a disappointing score in the reputational ranking. These results tell me that the underlying dimensions of institutional performance that have been driving our progress — the quality and achievement of our students, the talent of our faculty, the richness of our programs — fully entitle us to top-tier status. Sooner or later, the reputational score will catch up. Meanwhile we must get used to the fact that we are a top-tier university.

So it is time to address a new question. We must ask not only what is required to take the next step forward, but also what is required to sustain our top-tier position over an extended period? In my final year as president, no question focuses my attention more than this.

Three words summarize my thoughts on this topic. They are: excellence, distinctiveness, and interdependence.

I spoke a few moments ago about our campaign to deliver on our promises to students. This initiative continues a central theme of our effort to reposition Northeastern over the last 10 years. In my first State of the University address I spoke of the need to "intensify" our efforts. I recall administrative retreats at which we discussed the imperative of being a "high performance" organization and considered the challenge of "continuous quality improvement."

Along the way we have studied organizations that have achieved high degrees of success and we have drawn what lessons we can from published studies of successful corporations like *Built to Last* or *Good to Great*.

There are many ways to talk about institutional excellence. In the end what we are describing is an organizational culture in which every unit and every individual feels compelled by pride and by colleague expectation to perform at the highest possible level every day in every task.

For the faculty this means every class taught, every paper graded, every advising session attended, is, for every student, an encounter with excellence, and that every scholarly paper written, or talk given or grant submitted represents the best work we can do. For the administrative staff this means every day is an opportunity to demonstrate the highest and best contribution each of us can make to the work of the University. This responsibility applies equally to the crews that maintain our campus in such magnificent condition and to the most senior members of our administration. It is the way we must all think to survive as a top-tier university.

A second theme of sustainability is distinctiveness. When we began 10 years ago to identify the steps needed to reposition Northeastern, some argued that we should become more conventional, remake ourselves to look more like the Ivy League institutions at the top of the academic pecking order. That was advice we did not follow. Of course we need to be first-rate in all the ways that any top-tier national university must be first-rate. But our path to the top has also been premised on the notion that we will succeed best — and best serve the cause of education — by paying special attention to our areas of particular strength.

At the beginning of my presidency I observed that Northeastern is a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban, and I argued that we should enhance Northeastern by pursuing excellence in those five

dimensions of our character. That concept became embedded in what we call our aspiration and it has guided our planning, our decision-making and our resource-allocation decisions. I take pride in the fact that we have taken our place among the nation's leading universities not by abandoning our traditions but by reinterpreting them in the context of new competitive realities.

The third theme of sustainability involves our interdependence with individuals, communities and organizations beyond the immediate campus community. At the top of this list, of course, are our alumni. Our graduates are the most authentic judges of our quality. Their engagement with our work is essential to us. There is no such thing as a great private university without a strong, well-organized and supportive alumni body. We look to our alumni as ambassadors in communities around the country and the world. We look to them as co-op employers and as role models and mentors for our students. We look to them as partners in governance. And we look to them, of course, for the indispensable financial support that allows us to compete with other top private universities.

Our interdependence involves other communities as well. We depend upon our co-op employers and corporate partners. We cannot do what we do without them. We depend on agencies of government at the city, state and federal levels. They provide critical support and create the regulatory environment in which we operate. We depend on our neighbors in the Fenway, Roxbury and Mission Hill. These relationships are the foundation of our claim to be New England's premier urban university.

As I review the three themes that must guide us in maintaining top-tier status, I believe we are doing well in many ways. As to the theme of excellence, we have taken many steps to assure the quality of our work, and we are committed to meeting this challenge. As to distinctiveness, I believe our focused pursuit of our aspiration positions us to be not only a first-class national research university but also one known for excellence in well-defined arenas. With respect to interdependence, we are doing a good job in some contexts — I am particularly pleased with recent progress in corporate partnerships — but there are two areas that need major attention.

The first of these is alumni relations. Northeastern has not devoted sufficient attention to our graduates over the years. In recent times we have sought to build more sustained and comprehensive alumni programming, but we still lag behind many of our competitors. To compete as a top-tier university, we need to engage our alumni far more aggressively, creatively and effectively. This work must be led by our team in advancement, and especially our new Vice President for Alumni Relations, Jack Moynihan, but it is work that should involve every part of our community. We will be asking many of you for assistance this year in taking alumni programming to a new level. I urge you to be responsive.

Another dimension of interdependence that commands particular attention is community and civic relations. We have been doing

excellent work in this area, but challenges remain. This fall we are working with a community task force to find locations for two new residence halls, and during the spring and summer we will be completing an entirely new physical master plan. The success of these efforts will depend, ultimately, on the quality of our relationships with the city and our neighbors. All members of the campus community participate in these relationships in one way or another. I ask each of you to consider how you can help strengthen them. Vice President Gittens and his colleagues are available to provide guidance in this vitally important area.

So our institutional priorities in the year ahead must have a dual character: we must stay focused on those aspects of our performance that will propel continued progress toward the top 100, with special attention to our reputation and to student success; and we must embed in all our practices those qualities of institutional life that are mandatory for a top-tier university over the long-run, with special attention this year to alumni relations and community relations.

IV.

There must be, of course, a third focus for us this year, and that is the selection of a new president. Chairman Finnegan has announced the formation of a search committee, on which faculty, staff and students will be represented. In addition, the board has initiated a discussion of the parameters that should guide the selection process, including desired directions of future change that should inform any decision about new leadership. I will work with the chairman to assure appropriate campus involvement in these discussions.

In many ways, the campus faces more complex choices as we look ahead than it did when I became president in 1996. A decade ago, Northeastern was preoccupied with questions of survival. To be sure, we had weathered the crisis of the early 1990s, and we had pointed ourselves in a new direction as a "smaller and better" university. Under the leadership of my predecessor, Jack Curry, we had accomplished the painful downsizing implied by the "smaller" part of this formula. But we had not yet crafted a vision of how Northeastern could flourish in the competitive conditions that prevailed as the century turned. The "better" half of the "smaller/ better" formula had still to be articulated and actualized.

Accomplishing these two things has been the central challenge of the last 10 years. We can all share joy and pride in the fact that we have succeeded. That is the significance of top-tier status.

The question now is: what next? Do we raise our sights from the top 100 to the top 75 or top 50? Do we increase our SATs from the mid-1200s to the mid-1300s? Do we alter our mix of emphases on undergraduate education and graduate education and research? Where do we go next with practice-oriented education and our flagship co-op program? What about the comparative sizes of the colleges? What about our urban

mission? These are some of the questions this institutional community must contemplate as it focuses on the transition to a new president. As we do so I hope we will all remember the importance of the distinctiveness theme and nurture the special qualities of Northeastern that have gotten us to where we are today.

V.

So we have much to do and much to think about in the months ahead. We need to keep pushing toward the top-100 goal. We need, as the achievement of that goal approaches, to institutionalize a culture that will sustain us among the nation's top universities. And we need to find a new president who can help us be the kind of place we want to be 10 years from now. My own efforts will be focused on the first two of these three goals and I ask for your assistance and support. The discussion about new leadership is work that all of you, in appropriate interaction with our governing boards, will be conducting, and I will provide what assistance I can as requested.

As we approach these important tasks, let us do so with the understanding that our efforts to enhance the university's position are not some kind of institutional ego trip. We are pursuing the top-100 goal because we need to be in the top tier to survive as a high-cost private university. We are pursuing the academic excellence embedded in that goal because that is how we can best serve the students we educate, the organizations with which we partner and the communities we serve. We are animated above all, therefore, by our values as educators, as scholars and as citizens. As we achieve the institutional excellence towards which these values drive us, the ranking and the recognition that we seek will surely follow.

Thank you very much.