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State of the university address

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Speeches of Richard M. Freeland

State of the University Address Sept. 24, 2003 Blackman Auditorium

We gather each year to take stock of where we are, to remind ourselves of recent progress and to identify challenges ahead. Today's agenda is much the same. Except that today feels different to me.

Last year we were a university aspiring to a new level of achievement. We were ready to work hard, but we harbored lingering uncertainties about our success. Today that uncertainty is gone. We now know we can achieve our goals. That makes this fall feel different from the past few years.

Our new confidence derives from three main reasons. The first reason is our freshman class.

By now, you know the numbers:

- 21,500 applications for 2,800 freshman places.
- Nearly 700 high schools represented in the applicant pool that had never sent a single application to Northeastern.
- A 50-point jump — to 1201 — in the average freshman SAT.
- An average entering GPA above 3.5.
- An increase from 21 percent to 35 percent of freshman at the top of their high school classes.

Given this magnificent affirmation of the value of a Northeastern education, can anyone doubt our ability to attract exceptionally promising young people? Our students are telling us that the promises we make to them are compelling, that they and we together can achieve our aspirations.

We should believe them. And we should acknowledge our collective achievement, with great leadership from our team in Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, in sustaining a university that draws such a wonderful class. My congratulations to you all.

The second thing that has changed is our standing as a university.

Five Septembers ago, we set our sights on becoming a top-100 university in this decade. At the time, many thought this a fanciful aspiration. But we have persevered, working steadily to strengthen ourselves in all the ways a major university must be strong.

Three years ago, we ranked 150th in the U.S. News rankings, well down in the third tier. Last year, we took a solid step forward, moving eight places, to 142. This year, the gains were considerably more impressive: We jumped 15 places, to 127.

Our progress reflects gains in several areas. We benefited from both an increase in freshman SATs and an improvement in our acceptance rate. Our retention and graduation rates were higher. Our reputation edged upward. Finally, we were helped by offering more small classes and fewer large ones, and by the investments we made in faculty salaries. Our overall performance this year places us at the very top of the third tier, just a hair's breadth below tier two.

And all of this progress does not take account of the big gains we have made in the past year. This year's score for student selectivity, for example, is based on fall 2002 admissions, not the dramatic increases for the fall of 2003 that I just summarized.

There is another big change as well that was just reported yesterday. Between last year and this, our retention rates have taken a large step forward, the most dramatic increase we have seen in recent years. What wonderful news.

So, can anyone still doubt our ability to get to the top 100? And given the range of things that had to improve for us to come this far, can anyone doubt that this is an achievement for which we can all take credit. Once again, I salute you all.

There is one more reason why the uncertainties of last year have been replaced with the confidence of this year. That has to do with semester conversion.

A year ago, there was concern among us as we approached the final year of this massive project. Could we complete all the required work? Could we deliver a seamless transition for our students? Would enrollments decline?

That was last year. I believe we can say today that those worries are mostly behind us. We did it.

I must say again that all of you did it — all of you, in every academic and administrative unit.

I am especially grateful to Coleen Pantalone, who has devoted herself to this effort for the past three years, and to all the transition committees and department chairs and heads, and individual members of the faculty and staff who labored to make this happen, and to Senior Vice Presidents (Ahmed) Abdelal, (Philomena) Mantella and (Larry) Mucciolo, who coordinated the entire process. To all of you, I express the thanks of the

university.

I ask all of us to absorb the message contained in the conversion effort: If we can do this, can there be any doubt that we can achieve the other things we have set out to accomplish?

So, we come together this fall not as aspirants, but as believers — not as strivers, but as achievers. This is not because we have done all that we want to do — far from it; 127 is not the same as 100. But we now know we can achieve our dreams. We are here to affirm our determination to make it the rest of the way.

From aspiration to achievement to affirmation

Two years ago, we announced a program of financial grants called Unit Plan Achievement Awards. These awards take their name from the unit plans that each college and department has developed to indicate how it can advance the university's overall purposes. The awards provide significant budgetary increments to units that achieve unusual success in advancing their goals in a particular year. It is time to acknowledge this fall's winners.

I have already mentioned our spectacular achievement in admissions this fall. The university's Action and Assessment Plan includes an admissions target of average SATs of 1200 in 2008, five years from now. We did it this year. Much of the credit for this must go to our superb professionals in the Offices of Admissions and Student Financial Services, led by Deans (Ronné) Patrick and (Seamus) Harreys, and these offices are our first awardees.

Our academic programs, of course, will ultimately play the fundamental role in our success. So I am pleased to announce that Bouvé College of Health Sciences is also an awardee this year. During 2002-2003, Bouvé achieved impressive progress in admissions and retention, while also developing imaginative new curricula, adding several fine faculty, and working hard to advance our urban mission.

Challenges for our future

Northeastern is a university on the move. With this year's successes, we have reached a new plateau. The question before us now is: What next? What challenges should command our attention as we push the rest of the way to top 100?

One starting point in thinking about next steps should be conviction that we are on course. This is the implicit message in the achievements we celebrate this afternoon. And the course we are on is one we carefully crafted in our aspiration to excellence as a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban, and in our work on the Action and Assessment Plan and the unit plans. So as we seek focus for the next phase of our journey, let us look to the commitments that have brought us this far.

A second point of departure must be our understanding that every member of our community has something important to contribute. Just as the progress we celebrate today represents a collective achievement, so our ability to accomplish our future goals depends upon all our efforts. Our excellence is preeminently about our faculty and our academic activities, of course, and it is also about our administrative work in departmental offices, in our support and service units, in our physical plant department, all across the university.

So, against the background of these two guiding principles, let me identify key challenges that we face in getting the rest of the way to top 100.

A national research university

First and foremost, we aspire to excellence as a national research university. This means we want to attract students on a national and international basis and to do scholarly work that significantly advances knowledge in the disciplines.

The first and most basic challenge we face in this connection is sustained, energetic, focused execution of well-developed unit plans by each college. I urge the provost, the deans and chairs to devote themselves to achieving the goals we have agreed upon.

A second challenge in gaining national recognition is to form clearer priorities for three aspects of our work, each of which contributes to our standing in a different way. In the case of graduate programs, we need much more focused strategies to guide our efforts, and we need far more effective work in graduate admissions. I look to Provost Abdelal to lead our planning at the graduate level, and to Senior Vice President Mantella, working with Provost Abdelal, for leadership in strengthening enrollments.

In the case of adult and continuing education, we need a whole new approach commensurate with our aspirations as a leading university. I look to our new vice president, Christopher Hopey, working with his colleagues in University College and with the college deans, to rethink our work in this vital arena.

A third area that merits attention is athletics. We have been thrilled by the recent success of our intercollegiate teams, and by the popularity of our campus recreation program. I will be working with Athletic Director Dave O'Brien to make sure our athletic programs are realizing their full potential to enhance our visibility and standing.

To be a national research university we also need to continue expanding the geographic reach of our admissions and the diversity of our students. This year, we had as many applications from the mid-Atlantic states as we did from Massachusetts, and I am proud that we have made steady progress on diversity even as we have become more selective.

The challenge for our team in admissions services, supported by continued efforts in communications and publications by Vice President (Sandra) King and her colleagues in University Relations, is to continue expanding our reach beyond New England, including to centers of growth such as California, Florida and Texas, and to expand our international enrollments in a very difficult environment.

There is one other challenge with respect to our academic standing that we must face. As we look toward our future as a top-100 institution, we need to be sure our academic core is supported at a level commensurate with our ambitions, and that we have clearly defined the priorities that will catapult us to the next level of recognition. We need to be sure our courses are appropriately staffed with top-quality faculty who are paid competitive salaries, that they occur in well-designed and well-equipped classrooms and that our research infrastructure, library and graduate student support can sustain the excellence we pursue. We need to identify the departments and programs that have special potential to raise our standing. In short, we need an investment plan for our academic core that will direct the allocation of resources over the next several years.

Today, I am charging Provost Abdelal and the deans to turn their attention to this vital need in conjunction with the fiscal 2005 budget cycle.

A student-centered university

When we say Northeastern is student-centered, we mean that, among all the work we do, the development of students remains our top priority.

Our first challenge in this area is assuring that each student encounters the strongest possible learning experience. Our courses must be taught in a way that meets the excellent students coming to us today where they are and takes them as far as they can go. I urge every member of the teaching faculty to bring their full professional energy and attention to assuring the intellectual intensity of our classrooms.

With respect to the student experience outside the classroom, our Division of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, led by Senior Vice President Mantella, has been working on an enhanced vision of student life. Their work has painted an exciting picture of extracurricular life at Northeastern. The division's challenge is fulfilling the promise of this vision.

We also face major work in the area of facilities. We have made wonderful progress in constructing residence halls and instructional spaces and in the enhancement of our technology services. Yet more is needed. During the year ahead, we must craft a new physical master plan that will identify the investments most important to the student experience and to our academic work. I look to Senior Vice President Mucciolo and our excellent team in facilities to lead the planning process, and to

Vice President (Robert) Weir and his colleagues to continue the steady improvement of our technology.

Above all, the measure of our success as a student-centered university is graduating those we enroll. Improving our graduation rates is the number-one element of our ascent to the top 100. A university-wide task force, led by Senior Vice President Mantella, has been coordinating our efforts. We can be pleased by the solid progress we have made over the past five years, and thrilled by news of a big step forward this fall. But achieving our goal of a 70 percent graduate rate by 2008 will require much continuing work. There are challenges here for all of us, and I look to the Retention Task Force to show us the way.

A practice-oriented university

We also seek excellence as a practice-oriented university. This phrase applies to the education we offer, the research we sponsor and the professional activities we encourage. Above all, this part of our aspiration reflects our ambition to be the best place in the world for an education that integrates classroom learning with workplace experience and liberal learning with the pursuit of a professional or specialized major.

We have just completed two transitions designed to strengthen our eminence as a practice-oriented institution. The first is the transition to a partially decentralized model of cooperative education, which is now in place.

The challenge now for our co-op faculty, led by new Vice President Lynn Lyford, is to fulfill the potential of this new organization to increase the educational benefits of co-op and to assure the excellence of each student's co-op experience.

The second transition related to practice-oriented education occurred in the context of calendar conversion. Each college and department has designed an integrated learning model intended to achieve maximum synergy between classroom study and workplace experience. The challenge for our deans and faculty, working collaboratively with our co-op professionals, is to move these ideas from theory to practice, and to execute, major by major, the exciting and powerful curricular plans we have crafted.

There is an additional element of our practice-oriented approach that needs attention. Two premises of a Northeastern education are that a professional preparation today is not complete without a full, university-level experience in the liberal arts and sciences, and that liberal learning is greatly enhanced by testing academic ideas in an applied setting.

Every student in every professional or specialized major at Northeastern should have the opportunity for liberal studies in the arts and sciences, and every major in arts and sciences should have the opportunity to explore an applied field. To accomplish this we must offer both a rich program of general education and an extensive menu of opportunities for interdisciplinary and intercollegiate study — dual majors, double

majors, major/minor combinations. I urge the provost, deans and faculties of each of our colleges to make building this dimension of Northeastern a major priority in the period ahead.

An urban university

The final dimension of our excellence contained in our aspiration involves our urban character.

We draw strength from our location in one of the nation's great cities. Our students are attracted by the opportunities our setting offers. Many faculty engage in work that benefits from and contributes to our community. Northeastern embraces Boston and seeks to be a good corporate citizen. Today, with our growing reputation for academic excellence, with the strength of our research enterprise, with our dense pattern of connections to the city, we should be recognized as the premier urban university in New England and high on the list of urban universities nationally.

Here lies one of our major opportunities for national recognition.

We have work to do to achieve that. We need better coordination and focus for our urban engagements, and we need to tell the story of our urban connections much more aggressively. I have asked Vice President for Public Affairs Robert Gittens to take the lead in organizing our efforts in this area. Over the next several months, Bob and colleagues will be developing a plan to guide us. We will need the participation and support of many academic and administrative units. I urge you all to cooperate fully with Bob when he reaches out to you.

So we have work to do to get the rest of the way to the top 100. Some of the challenges I have mentioned are familiar ones on which we have been working for some time. In these cases, I am asking for steady effort informed by confidence that the steps we are taking are working. Some other areas have received less attention and need thoughtful planning to delineate our priorities. With top 100 in our sights, it is time for greater focus on these issues.

I hope we can all share in the excitement of our destiny, so close at hand now that we can envision it clearly, of nationally acknowledged excellence as a major research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban.

I must mention one other challenge. That is the urgent need to acquire the resources that will sustain our work at a competitive level. A critical part of the equation here, of course, is our success in improving our graduation rates. Nothing will improve our financial position more, or increase our ability to support our programs more, than achieving our goals in this respect.

Another essential component of our finances is our work in sponsored projects. We have made good progress in improving extramural support. I call upon our research faculty, as well as our staff in sponsored projects, technology transfer and

corporate partnerships to keep up this important effort.

Finally, of course, there is the Leadership Campaign.

We are into the final 15 months of the most ambitious fund-raising effort this university has ever undertaken. We seek to raise \$200 million. We currently stand at \$134 million. Our development professionals in the advancement office, led by (Senior Vice President) Bob Cunningham and (Vice President) Libby Roberts, are redoubling their efforts. Making sure that we succeed is my most urgent personal responsibility. Members of the faculty and staff, led by (Brudnick Professor of Sociology and Criminology) Jack Levin and (Career Services Dean) Carol Lyons, are assisting as well, both by participating personally in the campaign and by supporting our conversations with potential donors. I thank all of you for your help.

In the end, as we all know, a vote of confidence from those who can support us financially is as important to the fulfillment of our purposes as a vote of confidence from those who assess our performance for the national rankings.

So these are my priorities. In preparing these remarks I have tried to think about the year ahead and about the next several years. All that stands between us and success is sustained effort and clarity of direction. My purpose today has been to define the arenas in which we must focus our efforts. There is work for all of us, and it is all important.

One final thing. Our great New England poet Robert Frost once wrote: "The fact's the sweetest dream that labor knows." Today we relished some important facts that we have labored to accomplish over the last several years, and they do, indeed, lie sweetly in our consciousness.

So how much sweeter will it be, before this decade is out — maybe in 2008 if our plans hold true, maybe sooner if our progress in admissions is any indication — to gather in this room and celebrate our entrance into the top 100. I look forward to the joyousness of that day. And I look forward to the laboring with you in pursuit of that important dream.

Go Huskies.



