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State of the university address

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State of the University Address September 27, 1999 Blackman Auditorium

This past summer, we celebrated a genuinely joyous occasion of national remembrance: the 30th anniversary of America's first flight to the moon. Many of us still recall that moment: the anxious anticipation of the launch; the thrilling progress of the rocket across our television screens; above all, the moonlit images of the astronauts, floating, dancing and bouncing on that first, historic moonwalk. When news of the event reached Fenway Park, the crowd stood spontaneously and cheered without stopping for 57 seconds. Archibald Macleish experienced even deeper feelings, observing that the moon had always stood for something "unattainable . . . a longing past the reach of longing" but that now, in touching its "silent beaches," we had discovered a new sense of the beauty and hopefulness of life on earth.

What stirred us about the moon shot, of course, was the same thing that stirs us when we witness an extraordinary athletic performance, as we did this weekend, or see an exceptional work of art - a sense of human potential pushed beyond what we had thought possible, expanded in a way that gives each of us a new vision of what we can be. When President John Kennedy, nine years earlier, had made the moon landing a national goal, he was not just stating a mission for a federal

agency but summoning the country to a higher level of achievement.

That is the theme of my remarks today: that this university, only eight years after a crisis that brought us to the brink of bankruptcy, is on a flight that can carry us to heights that would have seemed unimaginable a few years ago. The reports of our recent progress by Provost Hall and Vice President Mucciolo summarize the latest chapters in this story, and I add my thanks to theirs to all of you for the remarkable achievements they reported.

Who would have thought, in 1991, when we were admitting virtually every student who applied and still not making our enrollment goals, that over the next eight years our applications would increase by nearly 80 percent, that in 1999 we would have six applicants for every seat and that the average SATs of our freshman class would rise by 120 points, from 17 below the national average to 86 above it? Who would have thought, in the dark days when our existence was in peril, that before decade's end we would have enhanced our academic stature sufficiently to rise from the fourth tier of the U.S. News & World Report rankings to the upper reaches of the third tier, gaining 24 positions in just the last 12 months? And who would have believed, at any point in the history of this university, that we would open the pages of the nation's leading trade publication in the computer industry to find our high-tech MBA program ranked first in the country, and to read a headline stating "Harvard, MIT, Stanford and Berkeley Trumped by Northeastern?"

This university's progress of the last eight years, like the ascent of Apollo 11 30 years ago, has been neither accidental, nor easy, nor the result of a sudden burst of inspired activity. It reflects the sustained efforts of many people. It all began with the painful work of budget cutting on the heels of a crisis that forced us to realize that our traditional conception of educational purpose - a mission that stressed large numbers, low costs and access for mostly local students - had been overtaken by changes in our competitive environment. Then came the harder, longer work of building the new Northeastern -

transforming the physical campus, enhancing our academic programs, supporting an increasingly distinguished faculty.

The good news that we celebrate today, like that moonshot 30 years ago, should give us all a heightened sense of what we can accomplish. We should realize that we can transform this century-old university into a new institution that will serve our students and our community as well in our second century as did our founding conception during our first hundred years.

The task of transforming a major university, no less than the task of landing a man on the moon, is ultimately a matter of four elements: purpose, commitment, organization and resources. We need a clear and inspiring image of what we want to accomplish. We need to care, passionately, about that purpose. We need to align our efforts across our organization. And we must marshal resources to accomplish the task. As we enjoy the achievements of the past year, we need to remind ourselves that we are on an extended journey, that our goals will require years to attain, and we need to consider where we are in relation to the four critical elements that will ultimately determine our success.

Purpose: from Mantra to Aspiration to Action and Assessment Plan

We have, I believe, done a good job of conceiving the new Northeastern. Our thinking is summarized in a statement that we are calling our "Aspiration," which affirms that we will "achieve excellence as a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban." Five key dimensions of progress: to become a truly national university, to strengthen our research efforts, to enhance the experience of our students, to link academic work with the world of practice and to be a model of urban engagement.

You all recall how we have developed the Aspiration over the last three years. It began with a sentence describing Northeastern in the speech I gave on this occasion three years ago. For many, that sentence seemed to capture a sense of what

we had become over the years, and so it evolved into the "mantra," a kind of shorthand characterization of the new Northeastern. Then, during the NEASC reaccreditation process of 1997-98, committees of faculty and staff took the descriptive elements of the mantra and turned them into a picture of our future, producing a report that transformed the mantra into our Aspiration. The final step in the process occurred last year, when Provost Hall, working with the deans, the vice presidents and other members of the university's senior administration, took our work on reaccreditation one step further, turning the broad goals of that report into a detailed statement called the Action and Assessment Plan.

A companion statement to our Aspiration, which we are calling our Vision, gives focus to our most distinctive quality. It proclaims that "Northeastern will be the undisputed leader in creating the nation's most comprehensive and dynamic model of practice-oriented education." This Vision statement announces a bold and inspiring declaration of purpose: that we intend to be the best institution of higher education in the United States in the arena of our special strength.

The Vision was also a product of last year, as the deans and vice presidents worked with me to craft a focused and compelling statement of how Northeastern could most effectively claim national recognition. Our best chance, we concluded, lay in building on our deep commitment to the liberal arts and sciences as well as our historic strengths in professional education and cooperative education, and in integrating these three forms of learning, traditionally isolated from each other, into a new kind of student experience that we call practice-oriented education. Here, we are convinced, lies our greatest opportunity for national leadership. This is the moon we should shoot for.

So we have an Aspiration and a Vision, and we have turned these guiding purposes into a detailed plan of action. The senior officers of the university, both academic and administrative, have committed themselves to working together to achieve the goals and objectives contained in that plan. We have articulated our purposes. We have charted our course. We have identified

the measures that will get us there.

Passion: committing ourselves to achieving our goals

But a plan is just a plan. It is words on a page. A plan has little value unless we care about it deeply enough to devote passionate energy to its fulfillment. Why should we care in that way? In the end, isn't Northeastern another large bureaucracy, admirable, perhaps, and with wonderful traditions, but hardly an object of passion? And aren't we doing well enough? Aren't the dangers that imperiled us so urgently a few years ago a distant memory? Why should we care so intently about achieving such ambitious goals?

For me, there are two answers to this most fundamental of questions. I call them the two imperatives of our transformation. The first has to do with our competitive position; the second involves our values as educators.

I think we can be quite clear about our goals in competitive terms. I take as my point of reference the U.S. News & World Report rankings to which I referred a moment ago. I share the doubts of most academics about the validity of these rankings. Clearly, more nuanced systems for comparing institutions are needed. For the moment, however, the U.S. News assessments are the most influential rankings of whole institutions in the area of undergraduate education, and they do, we must admit, measure serious things, like admissions selectivity, graduation rates and faculty resources. Currently, we stand 138th in these rankings, placing us solidly in the third tier and well above our position of only a few years ago. My ambition for Northeastern is straightforward: we must elevate our position into the second tier during the first decade of the 21st century.

I speak of raising our standing in the published rankings as an imperative for Northeastern for a very simple reason. We are a private, high-cost, research university. Almost all private research universities in the country are in the first or second tiers of these rankings. Our major overlap institutions are all in the second tier, and this group includes several public

universities that charge far less tuition than do we. You know, and I know and our students know of the extraordinary value of the education we offer, and I do not believe for a second that our sister institutions offer their students an experience superior to ours. But in competitive terms, we are not in a safe place. People who don't know us well, including students we would want to enroll here, judge us by these rankings. Until our academic reputation is at least as strong as that of our competitors, until our perceived value is commensurate with our price, our future will not be secure. If we care about this university and want to assure its strength for future generations, we cannot rest until we have raised ourselves to the next level. And we need to pursue our goals with special intensity now, when so many conditions are working in our favor.

There is a second, more important imperative that should energize our work. We stand for important things at Northeastern. These values are embedded in our Aspiration and Vision. We stand for opportunity - especially the opportunity of young people from all backgrounds - to obtain an outstanding education. We stand for excellence in our professional work, as teachers and scholars. We stand for engagement with the urban community. And above all, we stand for an educational idea of great significance - the principle that many students will develop best in an educational environment that includes both classroom study and practical experience and that provides them with liberal learning as well as professional preparation. In asserting national leadership in practice-oriented education, we take on a responsibility, not just to students at Northeastern but to all young people who might flourish in the form of education that we are defining.

So, we must summon ourselves to be a visionary organization. We must be the best in our class. If we aspire to play at another level, in a tougher league, we need to work harder and better and smarter to succeed. If we aspire to make an important contribution to education in this country, we cannot settle for less than the best work from every part of this university.

Organization: aligning our efforts to achieve the Aspiration

Passionate commitment must be tempered by disciplined organization. If we are to reach our destination, we must move toward our goals in a unified way, with each of our departments, both academic and administrative, and each member of our community working deliberately to advance our common purpose. We are not such a rich institution that we can attempt all the things we might want to do. If we are to sustain excellence, it will be because we have pulled together to accomplish our purposes.

Perhaps the easiest context in which to see the importance of unified activity lies in the area of student success. One of our greatest concerns has been the low percentages of admitted students who ultimately graduate from Northeastern. These low graduation rates have also been the single most important factor in suppressing our reputation in the national rankings, which is why the action and assessment plan calls for us to achieve a 70-percent graduation rate by 2003. This is a high goal, a challenging goal, yet it is also an appropriate goal for a private research university and a necessary goal if we are to achieve the standing to which we aspire. So we must ask ourselves the question, how do we increase the chances that each student we admit will succeed at Northeastern?

It is evident that no one unit can be held responsible for our graduation rates. The offices of admission and financial aid are important, but they are involved with only a part of the student experience. Residential life is responsible for another part. The bursar, counseling offices, the health center, the accounting office - all these units contribute directly to the quality of the student experience here. Above all, of course, is the academic experience - in the classroom, in the laboratory, in advising sessions, on co-op. Literally every member of this community can contribute to the success of our students, and our institutional future depends on our ability to foster patterns of work and service that reflect a determination to promote that success.

The same reasoning applies to other dimensions of the

Aspiration as well. We seek to enhance our research activities. Who is responsible for that? The faculty, surely, but their work depends upon the support of human resources and development and general counsel and physical plant and library and information services. We intend to lead the nation in practice-oriented education. Who can accomplish this for us? Each of our professional colleges must raise its competitive sights; our College of Arts and Sciences must be of the highest quality; our co-op program must reinvent itself.

So, to succeed, we must become an aligned university in which every department embraces the Aspiration and Vision, understands the action and assessment plan and works creatively in carrying out their responsibilities, to make the maximum contribution to the fulfillment of these purposes and plans.

On Sept. 30, we will be hosting a retreat for all chairs, directors, vice presidents and deans to discuss how we can best proceed to achieve our common purposes. That retreat will focus on the unit planning process that is already well under way in the colleges and will be initiated this year in our administrative units. The day's agenda will include a detailed review of the Action and Assessment Plan. At the retreat we will ask each of our academic and administrative units, when considering how to maximize your contributions to Northeastern, to utilize the Action and Assessment Plan as one critical guide for your thinking. We will work at the retreat to shape a process by which each of our departments can develop a vision of its own future over the next five years that will lead to the highest possible level of performance and the maximum possible contribution to the overall goals of the university.

Resources

The final ingredient of the transformation process is resources. We must link the planning that we are asking our colleges and departments to undertake to the resource allocation process. It is not reasonable to urge departments or individuals to enhance their contributions unless there is a plausible expectation of

budgetary benefit and personal reward. As the unit planning process unfolds this year, we will connect it firmly to the budget process and also to the ways in which individual rewards and salary increases are distributed. In addition, I shall create a special fund, the President's Fund for Excellence, which will make \$1 million per year available for each of the next two years to support the unit planning process through awards to departments that present particularly compelling cases about how such funds can enhance their contributions.

A second dimension of the resource issue involves the overall size of our budget. We have been working to achieve our goals under continuing financial pressures. Finding ways to enrich the resources available to us is a crucial element of our continued progress.

There are many components to our financial position, and we are working on all of them. This afternoon, I would like to mention two in particular where many members of this community can play important roles. The first has to do with enrollments. For nearly eight years, we have been speaking of a smaller and better Northeastern. This phrase has been an important driving concept as we have repositioned ourselves, and we must continue to limit the size of the freshman class in order to attain our academic goals. But in several other ways, we want the university to grow both to advance our educational purposes and to obtain the additional revenue that growth entails.

We want the undergraduate student body to grow by helping larger percentages of those we admit complete their work here. I have already outlined the kind of institution-wide effort needed to accomplish this goal. We want our graduate enrollments to grow. Here again, given the highly decentralized nature of graduate program administration, the concerted efforts of our departments are needed. We seek to enroll more upper-division transfers, and so we need the colleges and departments to focus on ways to ease the transition of these students into Northeastern. We need to revitalize the programs of University College, programs that depend on the active cooperation of the colleges and departments. So I would ask every member of this

community to think about ways in which you can assist our expansion in the four areas I have mentioned; progress in them will go a long way toward reducing the financial pressures that impede our momentum. We really need to be bigger and better.

A second arena in which we must all work hard to increase our resources is development. We are in the early stages of planning the next capital campaign. Each of the colleges and several of our research centers and administrative units have contributed to this work. Over the next several months and years, we will be moving ahead with our most ambitious effort ever to increase philanthropic support for Northeastern. There will be roles for each of us in this campaign, and we will need your best efforts in order to succeed.

The academic calendar

There is one other matter that I wish to place before you this afternoon: that is the academic calendar. For nearly 10 years, this university has discussed the possibility of changing the calendar. During this time, there have been repeated expressions of support for calendar change from deans, from planning committees, from the Faculty Senate and from the faculty more generally. For the past year, a working group of administrators, faculty members and students has examined the calendar question yet again, and a majority has concluded that we should shift from the quarter system to the semester system with a summer term of two equal sessions. Over the past few weeks, I have considered this matter carefully and reviewed it with the senior vice presidents.

I am convinced the time has come to make this change. I concur in the assessments of most of those who have looked at this matter over the last 10 years - that a calendar change would benefit Northeastern in multiple ways. It will make our courses stronger learning experiences for our students. It is compatible with the movement toward six-month co-ops. It will enhance our research atmosphere. It will reduce the strains and disruptions of student life. It will simplify administrative procedures.

I am also impressed by the relationship of calendar change to the broad pattern of institutional transformation of which I have been speaking. To take one example, the opportunity to redesign the curriculum occasioned by calendar change provides an ideal context for the curricular work necessitated by the Call to Action on Cooperative Education. More broadly, change facilitates change. Unit planning is about reinventing Northeastern. Changing the calendar will provide a framework in which other changes can more readily occur.

So I am prepared to lead a calendar change and to recommend this step to the trustees. But this is also a change that requires the cooperation and hard work of many people, and I would want to clearly understand the sentiments of the community before proceeding further. I will therefore be discussing with the leadership of both the faculty and the students means to assure a full public discussion of this matter over the next several weeks. I believe we should consider it carefully but expeditiously and make a clear decision about proceeding, before Thanksgiving.

Conclusion

I have touched on many subjects this afternoon. The Aspiration and the Vision. The Action and Assessment Plan. Unit Planning. Organizational Alignment. The importance of shared commitment. The budget. The calendar. It is a lot. But there has been a single focus, and that is the imperative and the excitement of institutional transformation. We are on a course of change. We have seen a moon out there in the heavens towards which to reach, and we are arcing our way towards it.

Yet sometimes I encounter an undercurrent of skepticism in our community. Some of you have been here for many years. There is at times a tendency to see the world through the eyes of the old Northeastern, a wonderful place, an invaluable asset to the community and to its students, but also in some ways a modest place and a place of mostly local significance and ambitions. It

can be hard, against such a history, to credit talk of national educational leadership and research eminence.

Let me offer you of a somewhat broader perspective. A generation ago, Duke was, at best, a regional university little known outside the South. Stanford was a modest West Coast institution. Brandeis did not exist before World War II. In remarkably short periods, each of these institutions transformed itself into nationally distinguished universities. We see the same pattern in the business community. In the early 1920s, IBM was called the Computing, Tabulating and Recording Company, and primarily sold time clocks and weighing scales. As late as 1952, Boeing had virtually no presence in commercial aviation.

None of the universities or companies I have mentioned was in a stronger position when they started their ascent to national prominence than is Northeastern today. None had an assured future. What these places had in common was a clear sense of the contribution they wanted to make and the values that animated them, a strong organization unified behind that vision, and a firm commitment to accomplishing their goals.

I believe we possess all the ingredients for success. We have a clear sense of purpose. We have a plan for how to proceed. We have, I am convinced, a winning formula. All we need is to organize our efforts and find within ourselves the passion, energy and commitment to see our progress through to goals. I have no doubt we will reach the moon we have identified for ourselves, and I have no doubt that the rest of the ride can be joyous and rewarding. John Kennedy put it this way 37 years ago: "We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade not because it is easy but because it is hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone and one which we intend to win." This is one Northeastern intends to win.

Thank you very much.

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