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State of the university address

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State of the University Address September 30, 1996 Blackman Auditorium

Those of you who have heard me speak about Northeastern know that I have aspired to nothing higher or finer in my professional life than to be president of this great university. I stand before you convinced that I have been offered the opportunity of a lifetime - to lead an institution I have admired for many years into a new century and to work with this academic community in shaping a collective future worthy of a distinguished past. I am proud and humbled by this opportunity, and I am deeply committed to the task ahead. We are going to be together for a while, and I expect it to be a good ride. I ask you to join me in engaging the excitement and the promise of the time.

I had an experience when I arrived back in Boston that reminded me why I feel so strongly about this place. My wife and I had driven up from New York on a fine August day to move into an apartment we had rented for this year. The first person to greet us was the security director for our building, a young, well-dressed man who approached us with a broad smile, a mature bearing and an extended hand. He identified himself immediately as a graduate of Northeastern's College of Criminal Justice. He went on to explain how the college had helped him find direction in his life, how his experiences on co-op had given him an opportunity to test and refine his interests, and how much of an advantage over his peers co-op had given him when the time had come to look for a job. I was immediately taken with him - his pride in himself and his position, his well-spoken manner, his air of competence and confidence, and his enthusiasm for this university. As

he talked, I glanced at my wife and smiled. She understood and smiled back. I had told her we were coming to a wonderful place, and here we were in a confirming encounter as soon as we arrived in town. The moment lofted us onto an emotional high that lasted the rest of the weekend.

That chance meeting was the first of many inspiring occasions that have dominated my first weeks on campus. During August and early September I have met with faculty and students, the deans of the colleges, the senior members of the administration, alumni/ae and members of the board of trustees. Through these sessions I learned details about this community that I had known previously only as abstractions: the scholarly achievements of the faculty across an impressive array of disciplines; the energy, enthusiasm, and intelligence of our students; the dedication of an administrative staff committed to supporting our work of teaching, learning and scholarship; the involvements with metropolitan Boston that make Northeastern the leading academic citizen of this town; the diversity that expresses our profound commitment to the ideal of cultural pluralism. Discovering these strengths has deepened my appreciation of this place and heightened the excitement I felt during that first encounter with my building's security director.

I have not, of course, found only enthusiasm and optimism during my first weeks here. I have learned a great deal about the difficult years that this community has endured in the recent past: the plummeting enrollments of the early 1990s; the continuing financial constraints associated with the subsequent downsizing; the painful reductions in force; the frustration of mid-year budget cuts on the heels of hopes that better times were returning. I have also discovered more about the steps you have taken in response to adversity: the adoption at all levels of a new conception of this university as smaller and better; the wide-ranging strategic planning exercise that articulated critical themes of change to realize the new vision of Northeastern; the work of the implementation committee to see that the themes of the strategic plan are pursued; the enactment of smaller and better through budget discipline, job consolidation and steady effort by academic and administrative units across the university; and the recent efforts of the restructuring committee to identify means, through both additional economies and new sources of revenue, to finally eliminate our problem of structural deficits. So I salute the gritty determination and

manifest pride of a community that has endured hardship and has not only survived but has achieved significant academic and physical growth.

I also salute with special praise the man who led this university through its winter of discontent, Jack Curry. It is impossible to imagine how anyone else could have brought Northeastern through the difficulties of the past several years as united as a community or as well-positioned to face the challenges ahead as did Jack. By shouldering our cares at our time of maximum vulnerability, he has earned our deep gratitude - and he has earned a rest. We, every one of us, are deeply in his debt.

Now, however, it is a new time, a new moment in the history of this university. As you have heard in the reports of vice presidents [Michael] Baer and [Robert] Culver, we are blessed with encouraging indicators for the year ahead. The fall enrollment picture is hopeful, and I am optimistic that, for the first time in three years, we will avoid mid-year budget cuts. The reductions already taken or planned for the current year, combined with savings from the new health plan and other administrative means, should spare us a repetition of that unfortunate pattern as well as any need this year for additional staffing reductions. Capital projects long in the works are coming to fruition, and the quality of life at Northeastern will be greatly enriched by the Egan Research Center, the Marino Recreation Center and the improvements along Huntington Avenue scheduled to begin next spring. Our development office is confident that the Centennial Campaign will be brought to a successful conclusion over the next 15 months.

These positive signs reflect not only the hard work of this institutional community over several years but three external developments that we can reasonably expect to continue: first, initial signs that the long-awaited increase in high school graduates will lead to higher numbers of college-going students; second, impressive evidence that today's most gifted students are seeking an undergraduate education that will help them find employment immediately after college - a pattern that is bound to heighten the attractiveness of our programs to talented applicants; third, a regional economy that has slowly recovered from the reverses of the late 1980s and appears likely to remain solid for the next several years.

So we face a time of opportunity, a time of hope. In this context I do not plan to circulate the report of the restructuring committee, which was crafted amid worries that additional budget reductions were needed to avoid further midyear cuts. We are blessed for now with a period in which we can focus on the positive steps we must take to build toward our future. With the exception of the reductions already planned for the academic area, our immediate attention should not be on reducing the budget or rearranging our structures but on determining where we are as an academic community and where we want to go.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not forecasting comfortable times. We are not about to return to the 1960s or the 1980s when money flowed easily into academia and troublesome choices could be avoided. On the contrary, we are experiencing one of the most difficult periods that American higher education has faced in this century. We shall be under continuing pressure from skeptical and even hostile publics to demonstrate the efficiency of our operations as well as the efficacy of our work. We shall be competing, regionally and nationally, with other fine universities that are also seeking to improve their circumstances. To meet these challenges we shall need to maintain budget stability, to assure an internal distribution of resources best suited to our purposes and to address over time the structural deficit that has plagued us in the recent past. These mandates will require continuing financial discipline and further painful choices, and the recommendations of the restructuring committee will be an important source of ideas as we pursue these goals.

We will need, all of us, in every unit of this university, to work very hard in the period ahead. Hope presents itself to us as an opportunity to grasp, not as a gift to be accepted. But it is there, it is real, and as your president I intend to make sure we seize this moment with energy and confidence and that we fulfill together the academic promise that our history, our character and our collective determination offer us.

In the latter part of my comments today, I shall outline a number of specific steps I am taking to advance our educational and scholarly goals. Before doing so, however, I would like to step back from our immediate circumstances and speak for a few moments about how I see this university, since the ways in which we seek to improve must reflect our guiding ideas about what we are and aspire to be. John

Henry Cardinal Newman had it right when he observed that "in the nature of things, greatness and unity go together; excellence implies a center." As we look to our future, we must ask ourselves: where is our center? What is the character of our greatness?

I am an historian, so let me begin with history. The founders of Northeastern sought to offer students something distinctive, and throughout this century, we have taken pride in our differences from traditional universities. This emphasis on distinctiveness is not, of course, a homegrown idiosyncrasy but reflects a national system of higher education unique in the world in the diversity of its colleges and universities. I have long agreed with former Harvard president James Conant that the institutional variability fostered by our free-wheeling, flexible, decentralized and competitive system best expresses American values and best serves the interests of a free society. For me, therefore, Northeastern's traditional emphasis on being something particular is both prudent and virtuous, and my intention is to sustain and build upon the special qualities that have evolved as we have grown from the Evening Institute of the local "Y" into the great, modern, complex university that we are today.

How, then, should we characterize the themes of our excellence in 1996? I would put it this way: Northeastern is a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban. These terms and phrases evoke the accomplishments of our past while pointing us toward new frontiers of achievement. Let me say what I mean by each of them.

The first two words - national and research - define our fundamental character and are linked together as the major changes of the past 35 years. No one would have used these terms to describe Northeastern in 1960. Yet today we are so defined, and rightly, by both the quasi-official classifications of the Carnegie Foundation and the pop market raters at US News & World Report. Today, far more than 20 or 40 years ago, our students come from every region of the country and many countries of the world. Today, far more than in the past, our faculties are active participants in national scholarly communities and recognized contributors to the advancement of knowledge. As stewards of Northeastern today we need to nurture both these trends as central to our purposes of heightened academic rigor and steady scholarly enhancement.

There are, however, many national research universities, including nine in Massachusetts. So to be one, important and admirable as that is, is not to define ourselves as making a distinctive contribution or occupying a particular niche in the competitive landscape. The three other phrases that I have mentioned are critical in defining the kind of national university that we aspire to be.

The first of those differentiating characteristics is a determined focus on students. To be student-centered means that, within our commitment to sustaining a scholarly atmosphere appropriate to a full university, the education of students is our most important purpose and well-prepared graduates - at all degree levels - are our most important result. I am, of course, aware of the endless debates about the relationship between teaching and research, but in the end it is a question of balance, since any university worthy of the name encourages its faculty to engage in both, and universities as well as units within universities vary widely in their relative emphasis on these two functions across a broad spectrum of possibility. So to say that we are student-centered, that nurturing the talents, skills and personal development of students is our most important purpose, is both to embrace our full character as a national research university and to place greater emphasis on our work with students than would universities, like our sister institutions in Cambridge, for whom advancing knowledge truly ought to be the most important result.

A second defining characteristic of this university is that we are practice-oriented. Northeastern's educational roots are in professional programs that give students university-level preparation to enter the workplace. From business and engineering in the years before World War II, to criminal justice, nursing, pharmacy, the health sciences and computer science in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, this university has always sought to equip its graduates to begin productive work lives upon completion of college. Cooperative education became the signature of Northeastern because it has been such a valuable contributor to our overall emphasis on practice-oriented education. And co-op should continue to be our signature, not because it is a relic of the past, but because it can be a distinctive, innovative model of practice-oriented education for the future.

Professional education has, of course, evolved over the years, and the most striking change has been the growing importance of the liberal

arts and sciences. As the 20th century has progressed, educators in professional fields have recognized their intellectual dependence on the basic work of the academic disciplines as well as the powerful effects of liberal learning on students. So a solid experience of liberal education, and strong departments in the arts and sciences, are indispensable if we are to have effective education and research in practice-oriented fields.

A final element of Northeastern's character is that we are urban. Northeastern must view itself as not only located in a city, but as actively involved with our surrounding, non-academic community. This means that the scholarly expertise of faculty members is brought to bear on the practical problems of Boston and the metropolitan area. It means that the university pays special attention to providing access and opportunity for urban residents, especially graduates of the city's secondary schools. And it means that we work cooperatively with our most immediate neighbors. These are imperatives that Northeastern has honored for many years, and it is a point of pride for me that we are widely recognized as the pre-eminent urban university in Boston. Our challenge, as we look to the future, will be to sustain our commitment to this city while projecting our influence in a broader arena commensurate with our standing as a national university. Closely entwined with our urban mission is our commitment to reflecting in our student body and in our faculty and staff the demographic pluralism of urban civilization in this country. In recent years Northeastern has taken admirable strides toward becoming a model not only of diversity in our numbers but of mutuality in our appreciation of cultural differences. Despite the gains, diversity is a work in progress at Northeastern; we must continue to celebrate it as a value and pursue it as a central element of our institutional character.

So that is how I would describe us: we are a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban. Our task now is to translate this guiding conception, rooted in tradition but fresh with potential for the future, into concrete actions that will release within the conditions of a new century the full educational promise and intellectual excitement and social contribution latent in these phrases.

My formal inauguration will take place on January 17. I intend to use the three months between now and then to work with this community

in initiating a program of specific actions representing the next steps in our historic evolution. I do not think we need an elaborate planning process to provide direction or establish priorities for such a program; the activities you have already completed, including the strategic planning process and the report of the restructuring committee, have produced extensive analyses of our circumstances and outlined an array of potential initiatives. The need now is to act, informed by work already accomplished and based upon the principle of shared responsibility for governance that ought always to guide institutional change at this university.

I shall work through two consultative mechanisms during the three-month period before my inauguration. First, I will appoint a strategic advisory group, reporting directly to me, to serve as a sounding board for actions I propose to take at once and to help in defining additional needed steps. This group will include members of the implementation advisory committee for the strategic plan and the restructuring committee, for these two bodies were established through consultation with governance, are representative of a wide range of interests and already command a broad knowledge of our circumstances. At the same time, I will ask the deans of the colleges and the heads of the administrative support units to present proposals in their own areas of responsibility for advancing the broad goals I set forth today. The most promising ideas will be incorporated into our action plans and also in our budget for the 1997-98 fiscal year. Indeed, if our current hopes are realized and the financial cushion we now anticipate is sustained, we may have some dollars to support new initiatives in the spring quarter of this year. Immediately following my inauguration, I will convene a general meeting of the university to report both the steps we have already taken and those we propose to take during the spring quarter and beyond.

In the final portion of my remarks today, I wish to initiate the process of consultation by outlining the broad directions of development that I believe are needed in a number of high priority areas. My thoughts in defining such directions are bound together by the conviction that our emphasis must be on heightening the quality, increasing the depth and enhancing the rigor of our programs. I call it a strategy of intensification. We must intensify our work within carefully defined boundaries of scale and scope, not expand our size or further diversify our range of activities.

A primary immediate focus must be on undergraduate admissions to our degree-granting colleges. Here our goal, consistent with our commitments to diversity and access, should be to enroll students well-qualified to flourish in our programs and to complete degrees with us. We should not seek to increase enrollments even if the current [upward] trend in applications permits us to do so. The admissions office must meet our targets with the strongest possible classes, not exceed our targets to earn additional revenue. We must strengthen the competitive position of the programs we currently offer among potential applicants from our traditional service communities and we must recruit more energetically from other regions of the country and the world. In connection with this effort, we need to determine the appropriate size of each college so that we can seek a well-qualified class within that pre-defined scale.

Recruitment and admission are, of course, only the beginning of our relationship with undergraduates, and we have important work to do in enhancing our support of students after they enroll. Our current retention figures are more reflective of our past emphasis on growth than our more recent attention to selectivity. To change this, we need to assure our students more reliable financial aid throughout their undergraduate years; we need to implement fully the meaning of student-centeredness in considering faculty roles, rewards and responsibilities; and we need to assure that all our support services are as helpful and user-friendly as they can be. In the academic programs of the basic colleges, the strategy of intensification means enhancing the quality of our offerings, again keeping focused on the twin emphases of student-centeredness and practice that are our hallmarks. We must, as an immediate priority, take prompt, bold measures to recapture the competitive ground we have lost in two fields of historic strength, engineering and business. We must also plan to sustain more strongly our work in the health sciences. We must support the College of Arts and Sciences in becoming a national leader in linking liberal education to practice and workplace preparation in both general education and the major. And we must continue the process of providing all our programs with the best in contemporary educational technology.

In cooperative education, our goal must be to move much more aggressively, imaginatively and comprehensively than we have done so far to achieve the integration of workplace and classroom

experience. I am aware that useful steps have been taken along these lines, and I have seen some exciting proposals, but progress has been uneven, and some of our programs have yet to seriously address this task. The world leader in cooperative education must lead in reinventing co-op for contemporary conditions. I am ready to explore a variety of models and approaches as we seek to strengthen our signature program, and I agree with those who have stressed the need for faculty development as part of this effort.

In adult and continuing education, especially in University College, our objective must be to reassert the entrepreneurial spirit that has such a proud history here and to recapture ground we have lost to late-arriving competitors. We must actively pursue the potential of instructional technology as an alternative delivery system for reaching nontraditional learners, and we must encourage University College to design programs, both undergraduate and graduate, that serve different groups than those who enroll in our degree-granting units.

In graduate education, we must finally undertake the comprehensive review that has been under discussion for several years, taking the work accomplished last year by the Graduate Council as a starting point. Repeated studies have stressed the need for focused excellence rather than diffusion of effort in advanced studies. This is a basic meaning of intensification: we should not attempt to offer a comprehensive array of graduate programs, especially at the doctoral level. Rather, we should strive to be very good in a limited number of fields where we have special strength and opportunity. In research, we must move energetically to attract more external support, especially from corporations. While we will continue to encourage a range of research activities across the disciplines represented on our faculty, we have a special role to play in applied research, where the work of university-based scientists and engineers bridges to the developmental interests of industry, the technical needs of government and the social concerns of urban communities. The new Egan Center gives us a tremendous platform on which to intensify our relationships with companies in the region for the purpose of advancing science and technology and strengthening the New England economy. We need to move quickly to establish an operational plan to make maximum use of this magnificent facility.

In our relations with our immediate neighborhoods and with the city of

Boston we must continue to be a contributing citizen while developing as a national model of an urban university. Our students come from metropolitan communities across the nation. Our faculty works on projects whose significance is national and international. Social involvements focused on Boston are indispensable to what we are, but we can build on that connection to make Northeastern a national force in charting directions for urban progress even as we seek to show the country through our diversity what a pluralistic urban community can be.

So that is a beginning list of priorities for consideration by you and by the strategic advisory group. To achieve progress in the areas I have mentioned we shall need to call upon the maximum in initiative and creative energy from all our faculty and staff. I intend to seek ways to elicit this kind of effort, beginning with a commitment to defining through collegial processes operational goals that we can embrace together. Beyond shared governance, I shall build into our patterns of resource allocation incentives and rewards for units that take imaginative and effective steps to achieve our purposes in education, in research and in service. I will also do everything I can to return us to a pattern of regular, reliable salary increments that gives reasonable recognition to rising living costs and acknowledges superior contributions by individuals.

Finally, let me make clear something about myself. I am very ambitious for Northeastern. I came here because I believe this is a university with an admirable past and a beckoning future. I believe we have a well-defined center that can be, as Cardinal Newman promises, a basis for institutional greatness. I believe we can build on the accomplishments of the recent past to shape a university that is truly distinguished among academic institutions of this nation in the quality and character of our work. That is what our circumstances offer us. That is our opportunity. That is our challenge. And that is what, with your help, I am dedicated to achieving as president. Thank you very much.

Other addresses:

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- [Address to the Northeastern Corporation](#), May 21, 1998
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- [Remarks before the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education](#), November 7, 1997
 - [Centennial Convocation Address](#), October 16, 1997
 - [State of the University Address](#), September 29, 1997
 - [Address to the Northeastern Corporation](#), May 28, 1997
 - [Remarks to the Boston Chamber of Commerce](#), April 4, 1997
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 - [Inaugural Address](#), January 17, 1997
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- [Acceptance Remarks to the University Community](#), May 29, 1996

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