

### **Northeastern University**

Freeland Speeches Richard M. Freeland

October 04, 2001

# State of the university address

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#### Recommended Citation

Freeland~(1941-), Richard~M., "State~of~the~university~address~"~(2001).~Freeland Speeches.~Paper~36.~http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d1000208x

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## Speeches

State of the University Address October 4, 2001 Blackman Auditorium

NOTE: This speech is a slightly expanded version of the one President Freeland delivered on Oct. 4 and is accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. Clicking on the slides will open a new window.

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At the beginning of today's event, I acknowledged the continuing impact of the events of Sept. 11 on all of us. At some point in the future, we will be able to discuss that impact in dispassionate, even academic terms. We will know more about what happened and why, and we will understand more clearly the consequences. For now, our responses are emotional, our understanding limited and our ability to formulate clear responses severely circumscribed.

These catastrophic and tragic events raise questions for higher education and for Northeastern University beyond those they raise for our nation. Some of these questions are practical and involve our enrollments and our finances, as Vice President [Larry] Mucciolo has reminded us. Other questions are educational, as we think about our responsibilities as scholars and teachers and institutional citizens. Many have suggested that the events of Sept. 11 have changed American life forever, and there can be no

question that the effects will be profound and enduring.

And so we wonder what we should do. We question our priorities. We are members of an academic community, and we produce scholarly work about an enormous array of things. Is this activity less important now than it was before Sept. 11? We teach about many things. Is instruction in our subjects less important than it used to be? We are professionals and technicians and support staff in a variety of institutional roles. Has the significance of our work somehow been reduced? And finally, of course, we are citizens of an institution that serves the nation through education, and we have devoted enormous energy to strengthening Northeastern to meet the challenges of a new time. Is that effort of repositioning less important today than it was three weeks ago?

I believe the answer to all these questions is no. I say this not because I want us to get back to business as usual. On the contrary, it behooves all of us to stay focused on the events of Sept. 11, to participate in the continuing national debate about the meaning and consequences of those events, and to consider in this context how we might do our work differently or better. But I also believe we must continue to teach and write and profess across the range of subjects and disciplines that we encompass. All these subjects contribute to understanding, and all of them, ultimately, help us fulfill our most important function, which is to promote in our students the values of enlightenment, reason, tolerance and cosmopolitan understanding that are the world's best hope of becoming a better and more peaceful place.

We are particularly fortunate to be associated with Northeastern at this moment in history. We are heirs to educational traditions that we all cherish, and we are embarked together on a path of institutional enhancement of great significance. Our goal of making Northeastern University the best place in the world to pursue an education that combines classroom work with practical experience provides us with a mission worthy of the best in all of us. We need have no reservations about the continuing importance of the work we do. Each of us has an important role to play in increasing the excellence of this wonderful University, and I would hope that the events of Sept. 11 propel each of us each to approach these tasks with a heightened sense of purpose.

#### П

The need to find renewed dedication in pursuit of our aspirations comes at an important time. A year ago, when we gathered for this annual occasion, I reviewed our progress in moving Northeastern into the ranks of the top 100 universities in the nation. This goal expresses in compressed and measurable form our deep commitment as educators and as professionals to bringing Northeastern to new levels of achievement and recognition. In my speech last year, I expressed my optimism that we could accomplish this purpose, and I reviewed some of the accomplishments on which my confidence was based. I also recounted the things we are doing at the university level to strengthen our work — our efforts to make faculty and staff salaries competitive; our investments in student financial aid, technology and facilities; our progress in retooling our flagship co-op program; our initiatives to support graduate education and research; our conversion to a semester calendar.

The optimism I expressed last fall was real and remains strong, but I am also aware that change can be challenging and even stressful. Last spring, we decided to get some outside help in assessing our progress, and we invited Judith Ramaley, the former president of the University of Vermont, who had chaired our reaccreditation review in 1997, to spend some time with us, interview as many members of the community as could be arranged and share her observations three years later. Judith was particularly well-positioned to make such an assessment. As many of you recall, we used the reaccreditation process to identify the directions for our development that have guided our planning ever since. She knew all about our aspiration to achieve excellence as a national research university that is student-centered, practice-oriented and urban. She knew about our determination to achieve particular distinction in practiceoriented education. She also knew that we had developed an Action and Assessment Plan based on our aspiration, and that we had asked each academic and administrative unit to prepare a multi-year unit plan indicating how it would contribute to the university's goals.

The report we received from Judith was encouraging in some ways and challenging in others. She was impressed

with our efforts to turn the broad ideas of our reaccreditation report into a concrete plan of action. She felt that the goals we had set for ourselves made sense and were achievable. She reported that most of those she interviewed understood the importance of repositioning Northeastern at a more competitive academic level and that, indeed, most regarded our pursuit of top-100 status as both exciting and appropriate.

At the same time, some with whom Judith spoke expressed concerns: that we were moving away from our traditional values; that we were trying to do too many things at once; that some parts of our plan contradicted others. Some doubted that movement into the ranks of the top 100 was realistic for us. Other interviewees felt a disconnect between the circumstances they experienced on a daily basis — including tight budgets and the pressures of calendar change — and the grand visions articulated by university leaders. Judith also noted that some members of our community didn't feel they understood the university's plans or that they had been effectively involved in shaping them.

Judith's summary observation was that we had reached what she called the "trail-mix" stage of institutional change. We had undertaken an inspiring journey, and we were making good progress; but we had a long way to go, and we were getting tired and a little cranky. This was a time, she advised, to pause, sit on a rock, remind ourselves why we have undertaken this trip, and to have some trial mix to recharge ourselves for the rest of the way. When she shared these observations with a group of senior administrators, most felt she had accurately captured our institutional mood.

And so, as we assemble for the new year at this challenging moment for the nation and the world, and as I call upon us all to continue the pursuit of our aspiration and vision, we need to consider three critical questions. First: Are the goals we have set for ourselves realistic? Second: How can we focus our efforts to make progress most effectively? And third: Why is it important for us to work so hard to accomplish these purposes?

#### III

Let us look first at the realism of our goals, as embodied in

our drive to be recognized among the country's top 100 universities. I have stressed this goal not because there is something magic about the number 100, and not because there is anything sacred about the U.S. News and World Report rankings, and not because I believe the rankings adequately capture the quality of our work. I have stressed this goal because it is imperative that, in any reasonable external assessment of our stature as educators, we be considered among the strongest universities in the country. U.S News identifies the strongest universities by numerical rank. The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement refers to them as "name brand" and "medallion" institutions. Barrons Guide classifies such institutions as the "most competitive" in the country. As a private, high-tuition university, we need to be included in this group, whatever it is called. Over the long run, Northeastern will flourish only if the perceived value of our degree is fully commensurate with our price.

We had this year a perfect example of why we must stay focused on underlying indicators of institutional strength rather than year-to-year fluctuations within a particular ranking system. Last year, U.S. News rated Northeastern 138th out of 228 national universities. This year, because the Carnegie Foundation changed its system of classification, the editors at U.S. News enlarged our competitive set, adding 23 schools while dropping two. Since some of the new schools entered the lists in a position superior to ours, we suddenly found ourselves farther from the top 100 without any change in us or any of the other 237 in last year's ranking. We were also somewhat affected in the U.S. News rankings by the size of last fall's freshman class, which weakened our score for selectivity and also for resources, which are evaluated on a per-student basis. An additional factor in this year's ranking was a very slight — and statistically insignificant change in the raw score assigned us for academic reputation. When you add these factors together, our overall position slipped from 138 to 150.

So were Judith Ramaley's skeptics right? Is top-100 status beyond our grasp? My response to these questions is simple. No way! I remain committed to our goal, and I remain optimistic that we are moving toward recognition among the nation' strongest universities. Given the way these rankings are done, a one-year change in our number tells us very little. To truly understand our position, we

need to focus on underlying indicators of educational quality and compare ourselves over time with universities that have achieved the stature to which we aspire.

[Click here to see slide] This slide identifies a group of schools that are sufficiently like us to provide useful points of comparison. Nearly all of these schools are firmly established in the top 100, so their average performance provides us with a clear indication of what we must do to achieve our goal. So let us look at ourselves in relation to these comparators in four areas typically used to evaluate universities: academic reputation; freshman selectivity; student success and resources.

The first of these indicators, academic reputation, is a strong point for us **[Click here to see slide]**. For the past four years, we have hovered just below the top 100 in this category of U.S. News assessment, as our score has fluctuated between 2.8 and 2.9 on the magazine's five-point scale. The average for our comparator institutions has also been stable, only a few tenths of a point above our own. In addition, we have consistently scored higher on academic reputation than the lowest scoring of our comparator institutions. These numbers make it clear that our academic reputation is already within the range defined by our competition, and I have no doubt, given all we are doing to enhance our academic work, that we can move our reputation close to the average for our comparators.

Look, for example, at sponsored research, one of the most widely recognized indicators of scholarly standing [Click here to see slide]. Northeastern has made dramatic gains in external funding in recent years. This comparison, as you can see, shows us well ahead of our comparator group, and we have made even further progress since these data were reported. The success of our scholars will have a positive effect on our academic reputation, as will the success of our High-Tech MBA and our Center for Subsurface Sensing and Imaging Systems [programs], and the progress of our colleges as they increase their standing among their disciplinary peers as called for by each of their unit plans [Click here to see slide].

A second key area of institutional assessment is freshman selectivity. This slide [Click here to see slide] shows that our total applications have grown markedly since the mid-

1990s, a rewarding reflection of hard work by people all over this university. Even more notable is the fact that the number of applications with SATs over 1,000 has nearly doubled. In addition, as we have deliberately limited the size of our freshman class, selectivity has risen sharply. The slide [Click here to see slide] shows that we were at the mean for our comparison group a year ago, and this fall our position improved markedly, as we admitted only 62 percent of those who applied. This growing selectivity is evident in the students we actually enroll. As you can see [Click here to see slide], the average SATs of incoming freshmen has risen steadily, and they jumped another 28 points this year, bringing us well within striking distance of our comparators in this area.

The success of our students is another critical marker of our overall position [Click here to see slide]. The percent of our freshmen who return as sophomores has increased from 69 percent in 1992 to 80 percent last year, bringing us more than halfway to the level of our comparator group, and it looks like we will report another strong gain this year. We can also take pride in the progress we have made in helping our students succeed through to graduation [Click here to see slide]. Our graduation rate has climbed from 43 percent in the early 1990s to a projected 56 percent for the class of 2002. We have a steep climb still ahead, but the progress we have made tells us that further progress is possible.

Finally, let us look at resources. A university's wealth is a powerful factor in determining the quality of its programs, and the most commonly used indicator of financial strength is expenditures per student [Click here to see slide]. This is a particularly difficult comparison to make because of our co-op program, so the slide shows two versions of the calculation — one that includes students who are out on co-op, and one that excludes those students. Either way, we are spending less per student than our comparators, though the magnitude of the gap is greatly affected by the way the calculation is done. Over the next few years, I am determined to narrow the gap. To do so, we need to achieve a marked increase in the amount of revenue we derive from sources other than tuition [Click here to see slide]. This slide underscores the importance of building on our recent progress in the areas of development and annual giving if we are to match our

comparator schools in the support we provide to our faculty and staff.

So that is an honest appraisal of our position in the arenas of evaluation that matter most in most assessments of institutional stature. What does this analysis tell us? It is clear that we have made solid progress in the past decade. Our academic reputation is strong and getting stronger. We have become a much more selective institution than we used to be. We have made impressive progress on graduation rates, And we have reduced our dependence on tuition and taken important steps toward the financial profile we seek. The overall picture is challenging but hopeful. It is within our power to achieve parity with institutions already among the top 100.

#### IV

The second critical question for us this afternoon is how to concentrate our efforts to make maximum possible progress. Achieving focus is not easy for us. We are a community of diverse interests that take us in many directions. Moreover, as the multiple goals of the Action and Assessment Plan make clear, we must work on many fronts to achieve greatness as a university, especially the strengthening of our faculty and our practice oriented curriculum. This is why it is vitally important that each college, department and division pursue the course of progress projected in your unit plans. This is the hard, sustained work of institution-building. Yet I would also argue that in the immediate future, two areas of activity merit particular attention. Those two are student success and resource acquisition.

I doubt that any of you are puzzled by my emphasis on resources. We are all keenly aware of the financial constraints under which we operate. We all understand that there is an unavoidable correlation between what we are able to spend and the quality of experience we are able to provide. If we are serious about raising our sights academically, we need to be equally serious about supporting the work of our faculty, students and staff financially. It is also clear to me that within the broad area of finance, our greatest challenge lies in development. Despite the excellent work that has been done in recent years, we still must significantly increase the role that philanthropic support and endowment income play in

providing support. This is why the Leadership Campaign that we launched last year is so critical. I am pleased to report that we have already raised more than \$90 million toward our \$200 million goal, and we are getting wonderful support from volunteer leaders and members of our governing boards. I also wish to thank those of you have already contributed to the campus campaign. I can assure you that the successful completion of this campaign is a top personal priority.

If the arena of development places particular responsibility on the president and the governing boards, the area of student success requires the attention and dedication of every member of this community. Graduation rates are hardly a new topic among us. Yet as we have focused ever more sharply on the challenge of achieving top-100 status, the significance of this quality measure has become clearer and clearer. Every major system of evaluating universities utilizes graduation rates as a key indicator, and this is an area in which we have a greater gap to close than in other aspects of our work. So we need to stay focused on this until we have achieved the levels of retention and graduation maintained by our top-100 comparators.

There is a second reason why the success of our students must command particular attention. That is the relationship between our graduation rates and our finances. This, too, is familiar territory, but I need to underscore the point. There is nothing we can do, including achieving the goals of the Leadership Campaign, that will do as much to alleviate our financial constraints as improving our graduation rates. A simple equation makes the point: a 1 percent increase in our graduation rate adds \$1 million to the budget. If we were at our target number for student success, we would have \$15 million more to spend this year.

We all know that many aspects our work contribute to the success of our students. Some things can be done at the level of the institution. We are investing in financial aid. We are building residential facilities. We are directing the budget toward this matter. In addition, as he has indicated, the provost is working on several new initiatives, and the deans are keenly aware of the challenge. But, in the end, each student's experience of Northeastern turns on myriad interactions with individual faculty and staff in every department and every office of this university. It is

vital that each one of these interactions be at the highest level of quality, that each class, each advising session, each co-op assignment, each administrative transaction, each extracurricular activity deepen each student's belief in the value of attending Northeastern and strengthen each student's determination to attain a Northeastern degree.

#### V

The challenge of achieving our goals in the area of student success brings us, of course, to the third question I have posed for us this afternoon. Why should we do all this? I mentioned earlier Judith Ramaley's observation that we are at the "trail-mix" stage of institutional change. What can inspire us to care, to participate, to persist, and even to increase our exertions. This is, of course, a question that each member of this gathering must answer for himself or herself.

I will tell you my own feelings. I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks that we are blessed in the significance of our work. In the wake of Sept. 11, many Americans are asking how they can make the world a better place. We need not doubt the value of what we do. Providing educational opportunities to young people at the highest level of excellence is one of the few unquestioned goods in this society. Moreover, we are embarked on a mission to demonstrate that that our particular form of education — long considered marginal in the wider world of academia — is, in fact, at least as powerful an engine of learning as traditional forms of study. In achieving top-100 status, we will not only assure the future of Northeastern University but also make a contribution to education of national and historic significance.

That is what I believe. But I also know that we will not achieve our potential unless each member of this community brings your best intelligence to the task. A president can suggest a direction. But we won't get there unless everyone in this community shares that aspiration and works to achieve it. Neither I nor other members of the university's administration know best how each unit of this university can contribute most effectively to the success of our students. You know that. You have the power to accomplish that. So I am here today to ask for your intelligence, your professionalism, your help and your dedication. Over the next few weeks and months, the

provost and I will be visiting with as many groups of faculty and staff as we can assemble. We will want to answer questions about the university's plans, but we will want to learn more about your plans also, and we will want to hear your ideas about how we can do more to improve the quality of this wonderful university.

#### VI

So that is how I would answer the three questions I have placed before you this afternoon. Are our goals achievable? You bet they are. Do we know where to focus our energies? I believe we do. And is the effort worth the candle? I can only tell you that I can conceive no higher use of my own energy than enhancing the greatness of this university. So we are here at the beginning of a new academic year to reflect upon the journey we have undertaken. We are taking a moment to pause by the side of the road and have a bit of that trail mix that Judith Ramaley prescribed for us. And we are also here, as scholars, as educators, as university administrators and as Americans to rededicate ourselves to the high purposes we have undertaken, knowing that, with all of us working together, our goals are within our reach.