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## State of the university address

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## Speeches

### State of the University Address October 5, 2000 Blackman Auditorium

#### Introduction: The top-100 goal

A few days ago, I received a telephone call from a student who was preparing an article for the Northeastern News. My caller wanted to discuss the university's progress in the national rankings of universities published annually by U.S. News and World Report. He was aware that I had challenged this community to achieve recognition among the top 100 national universities by the end of this decade. He wanted to know how we are doing, and what did I make of the current year's survey, and why, after last year's dramatic gains, didn't we make another jump upward this time around?

I am always a little uncomfortable in discussions of rankings. My uneasiness arises from the obvious fact that current ranking systems are hardly the best or most important indicators of institutional quality or even of reputation. Thoughtful observers invariably regard these rankings with skepticism, and sometimes even with contempt. I would not want to be understood as taking the rankings at face value or of encouraging this community to become overly focused on any particular ranking scheme.

And yet, I do believe that it is terribly important that we strengthen perceptions of Northeastern among prospective students, other academics and the general public, and I also believe that the current rankings, including those done by U.S. News, are useful if imperfect indicators of how we are doing in this respect. Despite the high value

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we attach to a Northeastern education, we know we have work to do in projecting an image of excellence to important external publics, and we also know there are concrete ways in which we need to do better to be entitled to the reputation we seek. So, I set aside my reservations, and I proclaim the importance of improving our standing. Indeed, I go further. I regard the goal of getting Northeastern onto any reasonable list of the best 100 universities in the country as an institutional imperative toward which we should bend all our energies and against which we should assess all major decisions. Achieving this goal, in a manner consistent with our values and character, is the simple, central object of our drive for institutional transformation.

So I told my student caller that I thought his questions were appropriate and that I was happy to say that we are making solid progress. It was particularly good to note, I told him, that in the vital category of "academic reputation" our overall score remained quite strong and our comparative position improved, as it has in each of the last four years. It was also good to note solid progress on our graduation rates, though this is an area that needs to be a continuing focus for us. With respect to individual units, we can take satisfaction in the fact that our College of Business Administration jumped 19 positions among graduate programs, that our School of Law was top-ranked in the third tier, and that our School of Nursing was placed 15th in the specialty category. At the same time, I had to acknowledge that there are criteria where our comparative performance did not improve, or even declined, indicating how much work we still have to do.

There are, I think, two important messages to be gleaned from the current round of rankings: first, our position in the upper reaches of the third tier rests on a solid and steadily improving academic reputation; and second, as we compete at higher and higher levels, progress will come harder. We need to keep our eye on year-to-year changes in our position. But it is much more important to put in place the underlying changes and to achieve the deep improvements that will support truly dramatic progress over time.

### **Achievements of 1999-2000**

This is where my optimism really lies. I see many things

happening at this university that make me proud and give me confidence. Professor [Charles] Ellis, provost [David] Hall and senior vice president [Larry] Mucciolo have reported a few of them, and I add my thanks and congratulations to theirs. Some achievements have been particularly striking. We were all thrilled last fall when our High-Tech MBA program was ranked first in the country and thrilled again in the spring when we learned that a group based in our College of Engineering had won designation as an Engineering Research Center. These two achievements confirm something that we need to know about ourselves: when we focus our energies and put our minds to it, we can compete with the top universities in the country.

The High-Tech MBA and the ERC were tips of a very large iceberg. In books and articles, in conference presentations and opinion pieces, in sponsored projects and new discoveries, this faculty demonstrated our ability to contribute to our country's intellectual, economic and social progress. In classrooms and seminar rooms and laboratories, this faculty proved, once again, our dedication to education. We can all take pride in the high marks our students consistently give to their academic experience. We can be pleased also that 97 percent of our 1999 graduates said they would recommend a co-op-based education to a friend and that our co-op employers so regularly express satisfaction with our partnership. Knowing all this, we should be encouraged but not surprised by this year's dramatic increase in the percentage of those we admit who decided to enroll.

When we look beyond the academic area we see equally striking grounds for confidence. We seek to distinguish ourselves as an urban university. This fall, two Northeastern faculty members, professors [Paul] Harrington and [Barry] Bluestone, are shaping public debate on the shortage of high-tech workers and on affordable housing, arguably the two most important issues faced by the local and regional economy. This fall, we opened the first phase of our first-in-the-nation project combining student residences with affordable housing for the community, an innovation that the governor has urged other universities to emulate. Look, too, at the changes in our physical setting, the good, gray "brickyard" that long-time Huskies remember so fondly. A decade ago we set out to transform the campus into an attractive academic

oasis; this fall a leading scholar of academic architecture identified Northeastern as one of the most attractive urban campuses in the world. Or look at annual giving, where we achieved last year the highest level of philanthropic support in our history.

### **Assessing our progress**

We do have a wonderful story to tell. And yet we are only partway to where we need to be. We know that, as good as a Northeastern education is, it can be made better. We know that, impressive as our scholarship is, it can be increased. We know that, despite our efforts to improve student services, there is much room for progress.

I would summarize our situation this way. Ten years ago we committed ourselves to the task of institutional transformation. We have established, as the test of success, recognition in the top 100 universities in the current decade. We have, in effect, given ourselves 20 years for this project. We are halfway through that period. And I would say we are about halfway there. We have accomplished much. We have proved to ourselves that our goal is attainable. Our challenge now is to stay the course, to stay focused and to keep raising the quality of our work in every corner of the university.

In my state-of-the-university speech last year, I likened Northeastern's recent progress to our nation's journey to the moon in the 1960s, and that image remains in my mind today. We have accepted the hazards of reaching high, and we are well on our way. The first set of critical questions for us, as we begin this academic year, involves the craft we have built together to carry us. Is it sturdy enough? Will it take us the distance we still need to go? Are we making the decisions we need to make, committing the resources we need to commit, to accomplish our purposes? The second critical question is this: what are the most important opportunities we shall have this year to advance our purposes?

Let us consider the university-wide concerns where we have invested resources and energy in recent years. We have regularly spent most of our annual revenue increases on just three items: faculty and staff salaries, financial aid and technology. We have focused on student success. We are determined to increase our graduation rates, and we

are working on many fronts to accomplish that purpose. We have focused on co-op. The Department of Cooperative Education and the colleges, working together under the leadership of Provost Hall, have undertaken an ambitious effort to retool our flagship program. We have focused on graduate education and research. We have completed a comprehensive review of our advanced programs, and we have initiated a systematic effort to increase centers of research excellence. We have focused on facilities; we are taking the transformation of our campus to the next level based on a magnificent physical master plan. And, of course, we have launched the effort to convert, at long last, to a semester calendar, with all the educational, scholarly and administrative benefits that will bring.

This is an impressive list of achievements in the construction of our spaceship. Taking each of our major initiatives and investments one-by-one, it is evident that we are addressing matters of great importance. But a series of useful initiatives is not enough. It is vital that they be part of a coherent conception of who we are and where we are going.

So we must ask ourselves if we have created a compelling overall conception of the new Northeastern that ties all our efforts together.

We have, in fact, devoted a great deal of attention to this challenge. Four years ago, we identified the key characteristics of Northeastern that are expressed in our Aspiration and Vision. Three years ago, we elaborated those distinctive qualities into a picture of our future through the decennial reaccreditation process. Two years ago, we refined the broad strokes of the reaccreditation report into the specific goals and objectives of the Action and Assessment Plan. And finally, last year, we utilized the unit planning process to ask many of our 110 academic and administrative departments to craft multiyear plans identifying the contributions they can make to achieving university-wide goals. During the current academic year, the remaining units will submit unit plans so that, by June 2001, every part of Northeastern will have identified the steps they will take to propel the university's spaceship steadily and safely to the moon.

All of these initiatives and all of this planning has been a lot of work, and I am appreciative of the contributions

many members of this community have made. I also know that neither the results of our efforts, nor the processes we have used to produce them, are perfect. Implementation of the Call to Action has not been easy. The Action and Assessment Plan needs refinement in many ways. The unit planning process can be improved. I have appreciated the suggestions I have received as to how we can do better with all these initiatives, and I am working with my administrative colleagues to make needed adjustments.

### **The focus of our efforts**

But today is a time to consider basic questions, and the basic question about our planning involves the strength of our spacecraft. Will it fly? The Action and Assessment Plan contains 40 specific goals and dozens of action steps. Do all these pieces add up to a coherent strategy for progress?

My answer to these questions is an unambiguous "yes." There is complexity in our plans because a research university is a complex institution. But it is a mistake to confuse complexity of activity with complexity of purpose. In the end, all of our efforts, all those 40 goals of the Action and Assessment Plan, all those unit plans, all those programmatic initiatives, are designed to strengthen us in only three specific ways. They are intended to help us do a better job in assuring the success of our students. They are intended to enhance our academic standing. And they are intended to help us acquire the resources we need to do our work. That's it. Three overarching objectives: to increase student success, to enhance our reputation, to strengthen our resources. Let me say a word about each.

First, we are seeking to do a better job of attracting talented applicants who can flourish at Northeastern and also to do more to support through to graduation those who enroll. There is no more important objective within our overall agenda of change than this. Virtually every external assessment of our institutional quality gives heavy weight to our success in graduating those we admit, and we have a long way to go in this area to be comparable to the top universities in the country. If you look through the Action and Assessment Plan, you will see many goals and activities pointed toward this single outcome. The effort involves every member of the faculty as well as the offices of admissions and financial aid, our

support services, university relations, our alumni, our physical plant department, even our efforts to become a pre-eminent urban university. Enhancing student success is one of the great integrative themes running through the Action and Assessment Plan.

The objective of enhancing our academic standing is also critical and also involves many parts of the Action and Assessment Plan. The changes we are seeking in co-op are designed to assert national leadership in practice-oriented education. Each of the colleges must improve its position in its particular competitive arena. Our work in graduate education and research is also critical, as are our ambitions to strengthen the distinction and diversity of the faculty and to improve the administrative and facilities support we provide to our scholars. Once again, many parts of the Action and Assessment Plan converging on a single overriding purpose.

None of our dreams will be realized, of course, without adequate resources, and so many parts of the Action and Assessment Plan focus on the objective of enhancing support for our faculty and students. Particularly vital are our initiatives in the areas of development and alumni relations, our efforts to increase external support for research and programming, as well as many of the activities of our business office, our work in endowment management and our efforts to control costs. In addition, it is important to remember that the single most effective thing we can do to increase our revenues is to achieve the higher graduation rates we seek for educational purposes also.

My message so far can be summarized simply. We know who we are; we have articulated our character and our dreams in our aspiration and vision statements. We know where we want to go: recognition among the top 100 universities in the nation. We know what we must do to get there in the various departments of the university: we have incorporated the needed changes in the Action and Assessment Plan and in the unit plans. The directions are clear. Our challenge now is to make them happen.

### **The year ahead: Three arenas of opportunity**

I believe the year ahead offers particularly hopeful opportunities to advance toward each of the three

integrative objectives I just mentioned. This fall's spike in our yield rates and the challenge of enrolling an enlarged freshman class can be translated into significant progress in admissions and student success; preparing for calendar change presents a once-in-a-generation chance to transform our curriculum; and the new capital campaign can move our philanthropic support to a new level.

In the final part of my remarks, I would offer a few observations about each of these opportunities.

There is a lot we are still trying to understand about the forces that produced such a dramatic change in our admission pattern this fall, but one thing seems clear: we have come to a new understanding of our attractiveness to students. The year ahead will be a time to capitalize on this awareness. We must reach out even more vigorously to prospective applicants; tell our story even more confidently; and, by returning to an entering class of 2,800 next fall, achieve a significant gain in our level of admissions selectivity.

The large size of our freshman class represents opportunity in a second way, as well. To make good on our promise that the quality of our students' experience would not be compromised by the extra numbers, we have taken several steps to enhance student life. We have put resources into the colleges to enrich the freshman year. We have added capacity in advising and student activities. We are instituting new measures to track individual students and make sure that those in need of help will get it. With these changes, I look to the year ahead to take a quantum leap forward in the success of both freshman and upperclass students.

The beginning of active planning for the calendar change represents a second context of heightened opportunity. Under the leadership of Provost Hall and Executive Vice Provost [Coleen] Pantalone, a series of university-wide committees will swing into action to review every aspect of our operations in light of this change. Similarly wide-ranging reviews will be undertaken by each of the colleges. This year, in particular, will be a time when each college must redesign its curriculum to adapt to a semester calendar. So, if ever there is to be a moment to get creative about curriculum design, this is it. If ever we are to forge linkages between co-op and classroom, this is the

moment. If ever we are to build stronger ties among the programs of the different colleges, this is the time. If ever we are to complete implementation of the Academic Common Experience, this is the occasion. If ever we are to adapt our offerings to the new possibilities offered by instructional technology, this is our chance.

We are on the edge of a great educational opportunity. I urge the deans, the chairs and individual faculty members to seize this moment with both hands. We should come out of this year not just with a program that fits into semesters but with a freshly designed curriculum that represents the most creative thinking of which we are capable about how to fulfill the potential of a practice-oriented education.

Finally, a word about the capital campaign. We are calling it the Leadership Campaign because it is linked to our determination to be a national educational leader. This is truly a campaign for the new Northeastern. Our plan recognizes the change in our underlying economics. It acknowledges that the success of our smaller-and-better vision depends on heightened support from our alumni and friends. We seek to double the private giving total achieved in the Centennial Campaign only a few years ago. We seek to gain support for all those critical items — funded scholarships, funded professorships, first-class research support, state-of-the-art technology — that have historically been difficult to maintain.

Over the next few months, we will be conducting the quiet phase of the campaign. This will be a time when we shall turn to the members of the Northeastern family to commit themselves to new levels of support. The quiet phase focuses on members of our governing boards and on the faculty and staff. Before the Leadership Campaign goes public next year, we shall be asking every member of the Board of Trustees, the Board of Overseers and the Corporation to provide support within their means. And we shall be making a similar request of every member of this community. I believe 100 percent participation is a reasonable goal for both these efforts. If those who are members of our governing boards and those who gain their livelihoods here are not prepared to contribute to our purposes within their means, how can we turn to others to do so? So 100 percent participation is an appropriate goal, and I ask each of you to be thinking about how you can

participate.

## Conclusion

My purpose here today has been to articulate as best I can the opportunities we face as a university and to make clear why I regard the year ahead as a particularly promising moment for us. It is my hope that the intrinsic drive for excellence, in the multiple ways we aspire to be excellent, will move each of us to do our part in this effort.

And yet, one must acknowledge, there is an underlying question. Why bother with all this? Getting to the top 100 sounds appealing. National leadership in practice-oriented education is a worthy goal. Doing an even better job on behalf of our students is a noble aspiration. But aren't we doing well enough as we are? Our students tell us they are pretty satisfied. Our co-op employers give us generally high marks. Our enrollment numbers are pretty strong. The books are balanced. Why, in the end, must we undertake the hard work of institutional transformation?

There are two answers to this question. One answer involves competitive necessity. We compete for students with many other fine universities. Our tuition charges are comparable to those of private institutions in the top echelon of American higher education, and they are much higher than those of public universities. Virtually all the schools with which we compete for students have higher rankings or lower costs — or both — than we. That is not a good place for us to be. Our location in Boston helps a lot, of course, and our special strength in cooperative education causes many students to choose us over other places. But even here the competition is stiffening. Many universities are incorporating funded internships into their offerings. We need to show that we get better results in terms of learning, personal development, jobs and life prospects than our imitators. I am convinced we can show these things. But we are not there yet, and we don't have a lot of time. The demographic forces that are currently supporting our transformation will weaken after 2007. That is why we must achieve top-100 status in this decade. We have only a few years. Given the competitive challenges we face, we must proceed with a sustained sense of urgency.

The second answer to the question of motivation derives

from our commitments as professional educators. The student from the NU News who called me about the rankings asked if I had a favorite quote that summed up my belief that Northeastern must summon the energy and passion needed to rise to the top ranks of American universities. It was not a question I had ever thought about, and yet, so prompted, I quickly remembered a line from the famous architect Daniel Burnham. "Make no little plans," Burnham advised young designers. "They have no magic to stir our blood. Make big plans, aim high, remembering that a noble diagram will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency." Isn't that what we all want, in the end, each of us — as scholars, as teachers, as staff, as administrators: to be lifted by a vision? To be part of a noble undertaking? To dedicate our professional energies to a task of supreme importance?

My friends, the challenge we have set ourselves in transforming Northeastern offers each of us such opportunity. Let us seize it. Let us each achieve the excellence in our area of responsibility that is needed to make it happen. We have come so far. Let us keep our aim high. Let us pursue our noble design with ever-growing insistence. We know what is needed to carry us to the moon. Let us go there together.

Thank you very much.