

Inaugural Address
NEIU: The University of the Future
September 7, 2007

Members of the Board of Trustees; distinguished guests, students, staff and faculty:
I am deeply honored to stand before you today, and to receive these symbols of office and the charge of leadership. I accept them with humility and with great joy. I pledge to you my full commitment to the duties of this office and to the stewardship of this extraordinary university.

For over 30 years I have taught and served in public regional universities—institutions where the emphasis is on students, the focus is on learning. Although research is always a part of the core values of those drawn to making a career in American universities, it is in the public regional universities, like NEIU, that the task of preparing people for citizenship in America and in the world finds its place as the central mission. It is a mission and a commitment I share. I began my career as an assistant professor in chemistry. Although in time my commitment to the broader issues of learning and teaching led me to administration, I still retain my love of the beauty and complexity of the natural world. It is with special gratitude that I welcome today my first chemistry professor and the person who inspired me to become a chemist, Dr. Wendell Hess. Dr. Hess is the delegate from my undergraduate institution, Illinois Wesleyan University. Dr. Hess, please stand and let us thank you for coming and representing Wesleyan here today.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my long-time friend and honored colleague, Dr. David Werner, Chancellor Emeritus of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and the delegate representing that institution today. Joining him are several colleagues from SIUE. I will ask Dr. Werner and my good friends from SIUE to stand and be recognized. Thank you all for coming.

I would also like to express my gratitude on behalf of the entire University community to my predecessor, Dr. Salme Harju Steinberg, now President Emerita, for her long and distinguished service to Northeastern Illinois University. Dr. Steinberg, please stand and let us thank you.

And finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Inaugural Planning Committee. The Committee was created in May; the members are listed in the program. I attended its first meeting. I asked the Committee to plan—in consonance with the mission and values of the University—a ceremony and additional events which would celebrate and reflect the character of NEIU: to make it meaningful for the entire University as well as the region; to celebrate learning and teaching; to model collaborative work; to honor the global character of NEIU; and to continue or begin new traditions. You have done all these things—and I thank you. Many of these people are very busy right now and may not be present; would those of you who are present please stand so that all of us can thank you.

Today, in this lovely, modern setting it takes some imagination to appreciate the rich history of Northeastern. One hundred and forty years ago, in 1867, a group of visionary civic leaders in Chicago—people whose names are largely lost to us today—decided Chicago needed a teachers college—or to use the 19th century term—a normal school. It was a time of uncertainty and great opportunity. The nation had just survived what remains even today the most deadly war in its history—a war where its very existence was at issue. Illinois had given much to that war—thousands of soldiers, the general who led the Union to victory, and the president who defined the nation for succeeding generations. Chicago was then, as now, one of the most dynamic cities in America. It had been barely two years since the war had ended; the president who inspired the nation was dead. The nation, though wounded, was in the process of a great transformation—the Industrial Revolution. Chicago attracted entrepreneurs and immigrants. Then, as now, people of vision realized that education was essential to the nation’s progress. Education requires teachers. What we know today as Northeastern began as an experimental teachers’ college, Cook County Normal School in Blue Island, Illinois.

Over the years the name would change, the location would change, the mission would change, but the commitment to learning and teaching would continue from generation to generation. In 1961 what was, by then, called Chicago Teachers College North moved from the Sabin School to this beautiful site. We achieved University status a decade later, in 1971, and became what we are called today, Northeastern Illinois University. The University has not only changed and grown, but it has expanded to address specific urban needs. In 1966 we established our Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies as an important expression of our commitment to inner city communities and especially to our African American community; just three years later, in 1969, we established our El Centro campus with a special focus on service to the large, diverse, and growing Latino community; in 1978 we founded the Chicago Teachers’ Center, offering professional development programs for urban teachers and administrators; and in 1996 we joined the University Center of Lake County as a founding member of a consortium of public and private universities offering college-level coursework in Lake County. To complete the picture, this mix of essentially urban locations and partnerships also includes the Gensburg-Markham Prairie, which the University acquired in 1973. Consisting of 100 acres of unspoiled Illinois prairieland, it is located just south of Chicago—a beautiful preserve for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

This rich history tracks the dynamic growth of the city and the region. While keeping faith with its original mission—to provide an important resource for students from Illinois—today Northeastern attracts students from all over the world and is poised to become a model of regional public education with a truly global mission.

From the very beginning in 1867 students sought us out for the quality of our programs. While statistics on the first century are not easily available, just since 1961 over 55,000 people have graduated from Northeastern. I am constantly meeting people with stories to tell about how NEIU changed their lives. These people cherish this institution. I’ve met researchers, political leaders, teachers and university professors, artists, CEOs, and men

and women involved in business who each tell me their own versions of the NEIU story. People who walked, biked, rode busses and trains, or drove through heavy traffic to attend Northeastern—often while working at full or part-time jobs and caring for family. The degree often required a long-term commitment lasting years. This story is on-going. And what did these students find when they came to NEIU—the same thing that students today find: High quality academic programs, serious and hard-working students; and a committed and talented faculty and staff. Like Chicago itself—the city of broad shoulders, to use that famous phrase—NEIU has been the institution that gets the job done.

Shortly before I became president, the Higher Learning Commission visited the campuses as part of our 10 year review for reaffirmation of our institutional accreditation. Under the leadership of President Steinberg, this review went very well. The final report has been received, and the Higher Learning Commission had very positive things to say about our university.

The one substantive comment we received about areas needing attention was strategic planning. We are already working to address this. Since the first step in planning is a clear understanding of who we are and what we believe in, last Spring, on University Day, we began a conversation about our institutional values. Over the course of the spring, all constituents of the University were involved in a collaborative process that resulted in the adoption of a University Statement of Values. We celebrate those Values today; we see them displayed here on Banners—Integrity, Excellence, Access to Opportunity, Diversity, Community, and Empowerment through Learning. These values and our Statement of Mission serve as the foundation, and guide, for our planning initiatives.

At its most basic level, planning is about asking important questions, gathering data and information to inform our discussions, and working together to find the best answers. As we consider our future, we will ask questions such as:

- How do we assure that our academic programs are excellent?
- What are the most critical contemporary programs of study?
- How do we use data and information to improve what we do?
- What does it mean to be an Hispanic Serving Institution?
- How can we best assure the stewardship and expansion of our resources?
- How do we continually strengthen our linkage and service to primary and secondary education?
- How do we make NEIU every year a better place to learn?

Some of you have heard me say that NEIU is the University of the Future. Admittedly, it sounds like a catchy phrase. It is a catchy phrase. It is also our wonderful reality. This past February I attended a Higher Education Legislative Briefing in Springfield. At the briefing an Illinois Status Report was presented which included a demographic projection of high school graduates in the year 2018. The projection for the state as a whole 11

years from now reads very much like the demographic profile of NEIU's student body today. Let me run down the numbers, using the categories from the Report:

In 2018 Illinois will have roughly 56% white students; today NEIU has 48%;
 Illinois will have 13% Black students, today NEIU has 11%;
 Illinois will have 0.4 % Native American students; NEIU has 0.3%;
 Illinois will have 8% Asian Americans; NEIU has 9.5%;
 and Illinois will have 23% Hispanic students; today NEIU has 25%.

Literally, the future is now at NEIU; we are the University of the Future. This is an extraordinary learning environment. A gift.

As the University of the Future we must meet the challenges of the future now. We will focus on student needs and outcomes—from admission to graduation. To begin, we have formed the Enrollment Management Council. The Council is charged with oversight of enrollment approaches, data and appropriate measures of success, as well as identifying ways to build and improve a culture of student success.

Critical to the goal of fostering a culture of student success is attracting excellent students. To this end we will expand the Presidential Scholars Program, the most prestigious merit-based scholarship at Northeastern. We have established the goal of doubling the number of presidential scholars, to 24, in the next 2 years. We have already received a positive response to this, and we are grateful to those who have contributed. While these scholarships obviously benefit the individual recipients, they also contribute to establishing a culture of student success.

As we focus on student success, we will celebrate learning and teaching. Today I am pleased to announce the Audrey L. Reynolds Distinguished Teaching Award—an award that recognizes the importance of teaching and celebrates distinguished teaching. Nominations will begin next spring; recipients will be recognized at December commencement ceremonies. Professor Emerita Audrey Reynolds, would you please stand so that we may recognize you and thank you for your gift.

Given our commitment to prepare students for an active role of leadership in the global community, I am asking the faculty to consider the development of an undergraduate major in Global Studies. It might consist of an appropriate core with a variety of specializations such as Latino and Latin American Studies, African and African American Studies, Asian Studies, languages, the arts, environmental science. The peoples of this world are bound more tightly together today than ever before. Diversity, which for years had a very domestic agenda, has broadened as a concept to include literally the whole world. Few institutions are as prepared to take up diversity as a central tenet of their mission as is Northeastern. In embracing diversity we're not just asserting a goal but proudly affirming a reality. Northeastern is poised to become a major player, by example, in the evolution of American higher education.

Along this same line, we will be seeking private funds for an endowed professorship in Global Studies. This would be Northeastern's first professorship. This concept has already found an important supporter, Dr. Bernard Brommel. Dr. Brommel has designated half of his newest gift to the University of over \$150,000 to be used to further the goal of establishing the Global Studies professorship. I want to express my personal gratitude for this wonderful gift. Dr. Brommel has designated this as a salute to President Emerita Steinberg and myself. And we thank him. Dr. Brommel has designated the other half of his gift for student scholarships, addressing another critical need. Professor Emeritus Bernard Brommel, would you please stand and allow us to recognize you and thank you.

In 2017—just a decade from now, we will celebrate our sesquicentennial—our first 150 years. In 2017, it is my hope that today's students will look back on their time here as one of the most important phases of their lives, that they will look back on the NEIU of today as inspiration for their own commitment to making the world a better place, to resolving conflicts with dialog while maintaining a commitment to ethical principles, to viewing the planet as a gift deserving of careful stewardship; to peace as a fundamental right and not just a tenuous interlude between conflicts.

And, as described in our University Value of Empowerment through Learning—I expect our graduates to be leaders in their personal and professional lives. I take a very broad view of leadership. I'm from the generation that remembers the stirring words of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., individuals who boldly and publicly set the bar for national leadership. But leadership also embraces the quiet and even the deliberately anonymous who lead by example in their organizations, their homes, and their daily interactions with their fellow citizens of the world.

By the time we celebrate our sesquicentennial, I also expect Northeastern to be recognized as a leader among public regional universities for its dedication to its urban mission, for the quality of its students and the success of its graduates, for the diversity of its learning environment, for its collaborative character, and for the emphasis it places on stewardship of all of its resources.

To make another leap in time, although I don't expect to share that day, I look forward to 2067, the 200th anniversary of the University. My hope is that when students of today look back on a life well-lived, they will have cause to be grateful not just to those people of vision who made this institution a reality 200 years earlier, but also to all of us here today who reaffirmed that vision for the students of today and for the generations that would follow.

So, while we build on a solid foundation, and are sustained by confidence in the essential goodness of the task before us, we know there is work to be done. Let us go forward together. Let us reaffirm the vision of those who began this journey 140 years ago, and let us fulfill our duty to carry that vision forward and to build upon it for the benefit of this and future generations. Thank you.

