

Experience Unleashed

A vision for learning and discovery in an age of intersecting contexts, challenges, and opportunities

Throughout history, humans have interacted with the physical and biological worlds and with each other. These interactions have often intersected—manifesting in nearly infinite opportunities and challenges for society.

For centuries, higher education explored these worlds and developed frameworks for understanding: Newtonian physics, genetics, social anthropology, history, the great books. These explorations rarely involved leaving the confines of a campus and leveraging the power of experience.

In recent years a new world, the digital world, has emerged and is taking its place alongside the physical, biological, and human worlds—in myriad junctures and manifestations.

But these interactions and the ways they manifest themselves are not uniform. The problems and opportunities they create shift and evolve depending entirely on context—the near-limitless range of variables that make up human experience.

The Covid-19 pandemic and other recent disruptions have illustrated a stark truth—the intersection of these four worlds is confronting humankind with an onslaught of new contexts to navigate, understand, and solve.

Higher education's traditional approach to understanding the world is incapable of addressing all these real and possible contexts in ways that have immediate societal impact on global challenges.

We stand at an inflection point. This consequential moment has given Northeastern an imperative and an opportunity to achieve transformative impact in the world and maintain our leadership in revolutionizing higher education's role in the modern age. The endless intersecting interactions of the four worlds, and our contexts for understanding them, must be at the heart of a university dedicated to integrating academic pursuits and lived experience.

Only experience can yield insights into the varied, ever-changing contexts of a problem; only experience can serve as the fulcrum that gives us leverage over our opportunities.

Our new vision for Northeastern, therefore, demands that we wholly immerse learning and discovery in experience

This requires a fundamental rethinking of our classrooms, campuses, partnerships, and communities: as unbounded spaces to experience, understand, and solve challenges in their evolving contexts generated by the four worlds in dynamic interaction.

To achieve this transformative state, we will start by building a more diverse and inclusive university. Beyond the moral imperative to redress centuries of racial, gender-based, and religious oppression, we have a broader purpose. To fully understand and solve problems in the context of the human world's interactions, we must sustain a continuous dialogue among people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, ideologies, and intellectual traditions—the varied contexts that make up the human family.

Next, we must bring contextual knowledge and experience into every classroom and laboratory by providing flexible opportunities for the engineers, the designers, and the architects of tomorrow to learn and discover with the artists, the poets, and the peacemakers.

We will achieve this by creating expansive, interdisciplinary clusters of faculty, students, and partners that span the entire university—each focused on understanding and solving a real-world challenge through its multiplicity of contexts and perspectives.

Finally, as vital nodes for understanding worldwide challenges in context, we will expand the capacity of our global network of partners and campuses to forge new problem-solving collaborations

with their surrounding communities and bring our partners into our cluster ecosystem.

And we will invest in the global mobility of every Northeastern student and faculty member. This will heighten the university's capacity to target learning experiences and research opportunities to new and changing contexts—ensuring that Northeastern can create at the speed of change.

A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION

Northeastern's uniqueness as a university has always been rooted in connection. For us, scholarship and education are not abstract pursuits, but directly related to the communities around our campuses, our broader society, and the world beyond. Our overarching goal is always to maximize our positive impact in the world.

By fully erasing the artificial boundaries that separate higher education from the world, we will make Northeastern the indispensable university for educating talent and developing solutions for humanity's future.

We will serve as the preferred home for all those in academia and among our partners who want to see their work make a direct impact on the world beyond the four walls of a lab, classroom, or office suite. And we will restore trust in higher education's capacity to solve the world's hardest problems and prepare learners for lives of accomplishment.

I. Building on the power of diversity

As we re-envision Northeastern's future, how we become an inclusive university is the first question, not the last question. Understanding and solving humankind's problems requires constant interaction among people who bring their own diverse contexts and experiences to the conversation. Therefore, we must be a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community that values the uniqueness of its members, recognizes the power and importance of diversity in our own and surrounding communities, and ensures their engaged participation.

Gateway to solutions

We will create an inclusive entry point for those living in the diverse communities throughout our campus network to propose jointly developed learning and research projects designed to solve global challenges in local contexts. We will utilize technology to coordinate these collaborative efforts, generate data to track impact, and ensure that projects are continually aligned with campus and community goals.

Diverse community-building

We will enhance our mentoring, support, and retention practices for underrepresented students, faculty, and staff throughout our Global University System. We will prioritize investments in first-generation student needs and student-generated diversity programming. And we will intensify our focus on anti-racism and anti-discrimination in our curriculum and our research enterprise.

Community-engaged partnerships

Over the next decade, we will invest in formalizing deeper and more interactive connections with those who live and work in our campus neighborhoods. These partnerships will give our diverse communities agency in determining how the university can best deploy its resources to meet local and regional needs, creating a foundation for continuous evolution.

II. Erasing the boundaries

Northeastern will center learning and discovery on 21st century problem solving by creating diverse clusters of interdisciplinary expertise and experience that draw strength from the disciplines and their insights, each focused on a global problem and its contexts and perspectives. We will call these clusters "Impact Engines."

Nimble and highly connective, Impact Engines will integrate learners and innovators throughout our network. They will aggregate knowledge and experience across disciplines and business sectors and enable students, faculty, and partners to bring greater purpose and passion to problem solving. Impact Engines may align around an entire global problem or focus on solving a contained, related issue. An Impact Engine on climate change, for example, might include smaller Impact Engines pursuing solutions in environmental justice or global labor market policy.

Igniting the power of humanics

Impact Engines, drawing upon our disciplinary strengths, will become the focal point for education, research, and entrepreneurship throughout our network. This will fully activate our humanics curriculum while ensuring the continuous integration of ideas, people, and experiences across our network.

Mobility redefined

We will create an entry point for each member of our community to find and join Impact Engines focused on the issues most essential to them. Students, faculty, and partners will move among them, customizing opportunities to meet their goals. We will redefine mobility to include transitioning among the differing, ever-evolving contexts of challenges and their solutions.

Empowering the network

We will widen our globally mobile network of opportunities, linking our campus neighborhoods and our industry, government, and academic partners into diverse, multi-expertise collaborative communities focused on addressing challenges in every context. This network will also serve as our eyes and ears on the ground, yielding insights and data that will shape our material and human investments in existing and new Impact Engines.

III. The power of experience maximized

Whether learners pursue an existing program of study or create their own, they will experience their education in new ways: as part of an inclusive team of peers, faculty, and partners, integrating their diverse passions, expertise, and experiences to study and solve real-world problems of global consequence. This will be equally true for students who choose to focus on a single discipline and those who elect a multidisciplinary education.

Experiential from the start

From summer orientation to commencement, our students will be experiential learners. Our goal will be to make our courses applicable to real-world issues and designed to address the contexts of those issues localized to each of our campuses. Beyond coursework, we will create paths based on a “start small and go big” approach—for example, encouraging every faculty member teaching first-year courses to integrate real-world experience into their classes.

Customized opportunities

By expanding remote and variable-length co-ops and enriched virtual classroom experiences, we will open new vistas for students—from first-years to doctoral candidates—to customize their learning. For example, a first-year student might choose to pursue a co-op in Singapore while attending classes in London or dialed in to an Impact Engine project in Boston.

Systems thinking ignited

By centering learning, discovery, and innovation around Impact Engines, Northeastern will untether experiential opportunities from the narrowed perspectives imposed by disciplinary boundaries. We will prepare learners to think thoughtfully and strategically beyond those disciplines; to grow adept at integrating ideas and concepts from and for a variety of contexts.

Guided lifelong learning

We will develop “life and learning coaches” to support and guide learners throughout their academic journeys. This will include continuous feedback on the array of experiential opportunities most relevant to learners’ goals and where they are in their professional lives. Their work will be supported by a digital catalogue of experiences available across our global network, with resources in place to ensure that all students, regardless of individual circumstances, have access to every learning experience.

IV. Creating new currents for discovery

Impact Engines will emphasize seamless collaboration across multi-expertise, inclusive networks. Innovation will emerge organically wherever challenges and research partnerships intersect. This lively ecosystem will position our faculty to work more productively with industry, government, and our local communities on the research that matters most.

Responsive to shifting contexts

Northeastern’s Impact Engines will be responsive to the shifting contexts of societal challenges to ensure that we learn and discover at the pace of change. We will create an infrastructure within our research enterprise to achieve fluidity of ideas and discoveries among and between the Impact Engines; our departments, centers, and institutes; and our research partners.

Impact Engine incubation

We will empower our research institutes and centers, partners, academic departments, and individual researchers to develop new Impact Engines from smaller collaborations. These will be incubated much as entrepreneurs incubate new businesses: as innovative ventures arising out of issues and ideas that emerge from anywhere around the world.

Context-centered PhDs

Impact Engines will open new avenues for doctoral students and postdocs to apply their research and scholarship to real-world contexts. The mix of industry partners within the Impact Engines will expand opportunities for Experiential PhDs more closely aligned with each student's research goals. Students will have the flexibility to create personalized experiential PhD programs outside traditional disciplines. Our Doctorate of the Practice will extend our reach into local community and across industries, providing a scaffolding across networks of scholar practitioners.

V. Deepening our immersion in the world

Northeastern's diverse and inclusive network of campuses, partners, and communities is powered by a "global first" mindset. This mindset, amplified by the advantages inherent in our maturing global network, provides the university with continuous insight into the world's ever-evolving challenges. This will heighten the university's capacity to develop and target learning experiences and research opportunities to new and changing contexts.

Partnerships with a mission

Replicating the model set by the Roux Institute in Portland, Maine, and inspired by the transformative merger with Mills College, we will invest in global learning and research partnerships customized to the needs of our campuses, cities, and communities. These partnerships will prioritize talent creation, research innovation, and entrepreneurship aligned with one or more Impact Engines. We will leverage existing partnerships and Northeastern stakeholders, assets, and programs to demonstrate value to future partners.

Expanding global opportunities

We will utilize learning technology—including cutting-edge digital tools such as virtual and augmented reality—to enable learners and innovators to connect globally. But recognizing that being in-person confers vital advantages, we will invest all necessary resources to enable every member of our community to integrate on-the-ground global experiences into their learning, teaching, and research.

Creating unique experiences

We will utilize our expanding alumni, partner, and community networks to create "one-of-a-kind" learning and research experiences in more places around the world. In tandem, we will build out the courses and programs available at all of our campuses, offering learners and innovators more experience-connected learning opportunities that they can customize to their goals.

Empowering our vision through technology

The ability to teach, learn, research, and work from anywhere, with anyone is a foundational requirement of the Northeastern experience. Building on our investments of the past year, we will identify and activate transformational technologies and operational processes that expand inclusiveness and our capacity to connect.

REVOLUTIONARY IMPACT

This vision for the university constitutes a fundamental rethinking of higher education that will be revolutionary in its impact.

No university is better suited than Northeastern to bring this vision to life. We have created a global university system of places, partners, and experiences that affords our community unparalleled access to the varied contexts of global challenges. We now have the opportunity to fully activate the power of that network.

By imagining beyond all boundaries how our technologists and entrepreneurs will collaborate with our philosophers and social activists to create a new tomorrow, Northeastern can reshape higher education—and create a more prosperous and just future for all humankind.