Eastern about to make the LEAP

Eastern Connecticut State University

WILLIMANTIC — Eastern Connecticut State University is one of only eight New England colleges and universities selected to participate in the “LEAP Challenge Initiative” of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The project is supported by a grant from the Davis Educational Foundation.

The LEAP Challenge calls on educators to engage students in “signature work” that will prepare them to integrate and apply their learning to a significant project with meaning to the student and to society.

The eight schools selected for the LEAP Challenge will work together to remap curricular pathways and design projects that support deeper student engagement in learning; higher levels of student persistence and accomplishment; and more substantial ways to make students’ achievements visible and valued.

“Our experience has shown that students retain and apply the knowledge learned in class at a deeper level when their courses reflect the world around them,” said Eastern President Elsa Núñez. “The LEAP Challenge will provide all Eastern students with powerful learning experiences that address real-world concerns, at the same time that we can continue to have a positive impact on the quality of life in our local community.”

Eastern’s LEAP Challenge team includes Carmen Cid, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences; Carlos Escoto, professor of psychology and coordinator of undergraduate research; and Ari de Wilde, assistant professor of kinesiology and physical education.

The team will coordinate a two-and-a-half year plan to help faculty modify their courses — from introductory courses to capstone experiences — to engage students in research projects that tackle real problems facing local communities.

Most but not all Eastern majors have capstone courses that engage students in research activities typical of their chosen careers.

Some of the majors require that students enroll in an internship before graduating, but those often take place in the senior year.

“Our goal is to make a real-world research opportunity available to students earlier during their time at Eastern,” said Cid, “by developing the degree of their community engagement projects in freshman through junior courses.”

Eastern will receive a $7,500 grant from the AAC&U and the Davis Foundation to support academic departments in modifying their curriculum to increase experiential learning opportunities.

“The grant is much appreciated,” said Escoto, “and will help us continue Eastern's commitment to applied learning, which has been a major element in our last two strategic plans.”

“Promoting students’ engagement in the local community has also been an important objective in our strategic plan,” said Cid. “The LEAP Challenge will help our faculty increase the number of courses that tie curriculum directly to solving actual problems facing our local communities.”

In addition to Eastern — the only public institution in Connecticut participating in the project — other colleges and universities include Boston University; Champlain College in Burlington, Vt.; Providence College in Rhode Island; Quinnipiac University in Hamden; the University of Hartford; the University of Massachusetts-Lowell; and the University of Southern Maine.

These institutions were chosen because their teaching and learning programs and practices embody many LEAP-framed reforms and because their student-centered approaches position them to move to the next level of effectiveness in promoting students’ engaged learning and completion of signature work. Some of these institutions also serve significant numbers of students traditionally less well-served in higher education and are committed to testing LEAP-framed strategies to advance equity and inclusive excellence.

For more information, visit www.aacu.org/leap-challenge/new-england.