ECSU presidents’ vision for fine arts facility is realized

By MICHELLE FIRESTONE – Chronicle Staff Writer

WILLIMANTIC — Former Connecticut University System chancellor and past Eastern Connecticut State University President David Carter had a vision many years ago to construct a new building at Eastern for students studying the arts.

After many years of planning, the retired Carter’s dream is now a reality this semester.

And, on Tuesday, the opening of the Fine Arts Instructional Center was celebrated with its official ribbon-cutting ceremony.

“We owe a lot to Dr. Carter,” said ECSU President Elsa Núñez. “I wish he were here to see the building. I know he would be proud.”

The nearly 120,000-square-foot building broke ground in August 2013 and opened in January, when the semester began.

The building was designed by the S/ L/ A/ M Collaborative of Glastonbury in collaboration with William Rawn Associates of Boston.

It is open to members of the public and most events in the building are free. There is even a public entrance on High Street.

“As much as our students will benefit, we understand Eastern is a public resource,” said Núñez.

Pasquale Salemi, deputy commissioner of the division of construction services in the state Department of Administrative Services, noted it cost about $64 million to construct the building and a total of $87 million for the project. The project was backed by state funding.

“It certainly looks like it’s worth every bit of it (the money), as far as I’m concerned,” Salemi said.

School officials noted the project was on time and on budget.

Prior to the opening of the new building, students took classes in Shafer Hall, a building that is nearly 70 years old.

The Fine Arts Instructional Center includes a 400-seat concert hall, 254-seat proscenium theater, an art gallery, ceramics studio, sculpture studio, performance labs, a painting studio and drawing studio.

Yvette Melendez, vice chairman of the board of regents for the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System, noted many people were involved with the project.

“We know that president Núñez’s vision for this facility is exemplary,” she said. “We know it takes, really, a village to make these kinds of projects happen.”
During the event, staff members expressed their excitement about working in the new facility.

Anne Dawson, professor and chairman of the art and art history department at Eastern, said she got “goosebumps” when she saw how excited students were about the new building.

“We’ve seen an immediate impact on our students,” she said.

Mark Ojakian, president of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System, said he will continue to advocate for the Eastern students “because I truly believe in them.”

“The president (Núñez) has truly been a partner in helping me stabilize the system and move forward,” he said.

Ojakian said he looked forward to attending an event at the Fine Arts Instructional Center in the future.

“This center is an investment in our students and in their future,” he said.

Núñez emphasized the importance of arts and noted, due to general education requirements, all Eastern students will take arts courses.

“The arts lift us up and bring us together,” she said.

Windham Mayor Ernest Eldridge said Eastern has “always been a part of my family,” with several Eastern graduates, including wife Anita Sebestyen, in his family.

“The campus has changed dramatically,” he said.

For a schedule of events at the Fine Arts Instructional Center, visit https://calendar.easternct.edu.