HARTFORD — The XL Center arena, a place where winners and losers are usually made, was the home of only winners Tuesday evening.

That’s because about 1,221 undergraduate students and 25 graduate students participated in Eastern Connecticut State University’s 136th Commencement.

Optimism for the future was the theme for a ceremony attended by more than 12,000 family members and friends.

Graduates of the Willimantic university filled the lower level of the XL Center before the ceremony, anxiously waiting for the program to begin.

University officials said 40 percent of ECSU graduates are the first in their family to earn a bachelor’s degree and Michael Marshall of Gales Ferry not only was one of those, he also became a recent father as his daughter, Mia Rose Marshall, was born May 7, only nine days before.

Marshall earned a bachelor’s degree in social work and plans to earn his master’s in social work at the University of Connecticut.

He said he was “a little bit nervous and anxious” with the life changes of the past month.
Meanwhile, Manchester’s Marcus Adorno was “definitely excited.”

“It’s been a long ride,” he said, adding that with his sociology degree, he hopes to become a parole officer.

Tim Reilly, of Hanover, Mass., hopes to enter the business field with his bachelor’s degree in general studies, where he focused on communications.

“This is one of the happiest moments of my life, I never thought I would get this far,” Reilly said. “I want to thank my mom and dad. These have been the best four years of my life.”

Sonja Gagnon, of Glastonbury, who earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology, said “I want to work with public policy advocacy for individuals who need help with their mental health,” adding she plans to get a master’s degree in social work.

As for Woodstock’s Andrew St. Jean, he is proud to have earned his master’s degree in education with plans to be a high school math teacher, adding “I’m happy to be done.”

Hoping to work for a human resources department for a nonprofit organization, Hebron resident Sydney Hayes, who earned a degree in labor relations and human resources, said she was “excited, a little nervous, ready to move on.”

As graduates slowly moved to the arena floor, Travis Dings of Winsted, who earned a degree in history and political science, said “it’s a new chapter, it’s bittersweet to say the least,” adding he hopes to be a legislative analyst.

Jerry Franklin, president and chief executive officer of the Connecticut Public Television for the past 30 years, was awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters, and gave the commencement speech for the evening.

During Franklin’s career, he has helped bring a variety of programming to CPTV, the state’s only public television network, with shows including “Barney and Friends,” “Bob the Builder” and “Thomas and Friends.”

Franklin’s message for graduates is “Why settle for a career you don’t love? Why settle for someone to marry you don’t love? Don’t live someone else's life, live it like it’s yours.”

Making reference to an opinion piece in last week’s New York Times, which claims that optimism is no longer “cool,” he said “you may feel overwhelmed by today’s events. It feels like the world is coming unplugged. You may see these times as a pivotal point in human history. It is where we have always been. Life is all about moments of transaction. Do not be afraid of this time. Adjusting to change is what life is all about.”

ECSU President Elsa Núñez said when she walks around the campus, she sees plenty of optimism among students.

“I look at the future every day and I know we are in good hands,” Núñez said, adding her wish for graduates is “each of you have a long, successful life, marked by courage, strengthened through sacrifice and enriched by service to others.”
In the spotlight

Eastern Connecticut State University graduate Gabriela Wrobel, who hails from Ansonia, gives the senior class address at commencement exercises Tuesday night at Hartford’s XL Center.

Joy aplenty

Joy and smiles dominated Eastern Connecticut State University’s commencement exercises at the XL Center in Hartford Tuesday night. ABOVE LEFT: Lebanon resident Amber Fugedi is very happy to be receiving her diploma. ABOVE: Leo Navarro, from New London, performs some dance moves on his way to receive congratulations from ECSU President Elsa Núñez. BOTTOM LEFT: Jerry Franklin, center left, receives an honorary doctorate degree, a stole and certificate from Núñez, center right. On the left is Mark Ojakian, president of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system. On the right is David Jimenez, a member of the Board of Regents for Higher Education. Franklin is the chief executive officer and president of the Connecticut Public Broadcasting Network.

Al Malpa photos
Eastern Connecticut State University graduates

WILLIMANTIC — The following local students received degrees from Eastern Connecticut State University, which hosted commencement exercises at the XL Center in Hartford Tuesday: **Andover**: John Crandall, Cooper D’Ambrosio, Laura Duquette, Melissa Goulet, Peter Haggerty, Sean Hunt, Alexis Kurtz, Thomas McBriarty, Seth McCullock, Moriah Perrett, Benjamin Whittemore.

**Ashford**: Danielle Dumais, Matthew Enzor, Cooper Kelly, Kimberly Kouatly, Daniel Phipps, Emily Rodrigue, Chelsea Roston, Erin Sibley-Jett, Kathleen Viel.

**Canterbury**: Jason Curland, Elena DeLuca, Heather DeLuca, Shelby Jordan, Rachel Kaphammer, Amanda Lamoureux, Melissa Lehtonen.

**Chaplin**: Alyson Dziavit, Stephanie Seguin, Emily Semmelrock.

**Columbia**: Alphonse Catullo, Laura Combs, Marc Damato, Sydney Day, Chatham Francis, Meghan Kelly, Emily Kohn, Piotr Maslak, Amber McDonald, Eric Molitoris, Katarina Quarticelli.

**Coventry**: Richard Ashley, Stephen Brousseau, Colin Delaney, Cole Fleeher, Patrick Hnatow, Ashley Kelly, Meaghan Kennedy, Andrea LaRocca, Allison Lindlau, Jodi Magoon, Kara McDonagh, Jessica McDonald, Rebecca Osborne, Lea Richman, Brianna Schnell, Daniel Sousa.

**Eastford**: Alyssa Anderson, Ryan Perry, Renee Ringuette, Megan Torcellini.

**Franklin**: Eric Laporte.

**Hampton**: Chelsey Mott.

**Hebron**: Molly Bushey, Hillary Cavender, Dakota Dolan, Elizabeth Eldridge, Joel Hara, Sydney Hayes, Ethan Icaza, Zachary Lord, Philip Moscato, Connor Moylan, Matthew Sylvia, Aaron Tierney.


**Scotland**: Lauren Grenier.

**Willington**: Tara Bergeron, Patrick Blessing, Lydia Bray, William Fish, Christina Gonzalez, Nathan Gorgone, Nicholas Townsend, Marcus Van Vogelpoel.

Dennyson Ramoutar, Shoshana Rigler, Jessica Rivera, Reuben Rivera, Alexis Roberts, Danyelle Rodriguez, Yarelis Rodriguez, Daniel Rosado, Brandon Selstad, Patrick Stewart, Sailai Sultani, Robert Sutton, Kate Taylor, Elizabeth Woodmancy, Yalcin Yayla.