ECSU’s new fine arts building is a hit with staff and students

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WILLIMANTIC — With an art gallery and two theaters, as well as more than $4 million worth of new equipment, Eastern Connecticut State University students and staff eagerly anticipated the opening of its new Fine Arts Instructional Center.

After years of construction and planning, classes finally began in the new ECSU Fine Arts Instructional Center on Tuesday.

“It’s so refreshing to be here,” Afarin Rahmansifar, a painting and drawing professor, said during a tour of the building last week.

“Everybody’s excited!” Eastern Director of University Relations Ed Osborn said construction of the $62 million building, which broke ground in August 2013, was on budget.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony will likely be held in April.

Prior to the opening of the new building, students in the performing arts and art history departments took classes in Shafer Hall, a building that is nearly 70 years old.

Osborn said Shafer Hall is in good shape for its age.

The new fine arts building, however, features modern technology and more performance space, along with new equipment, including new musical instruments, welding equipment in the sculpture lab and lighting and sound systems in the theaters.

“It was exciting to walk in the first day of class and see students in the practice rooms already at 9 a.m. getting ready for lessons and whatnot,” said David Belles, a professor and co-chair of the performing arts department, on Tuesday.

He said the new facility will help students “meet their full potential.”

For Belles, the building was a long time coming.

“It’s just thrilling,” he said.

“This is the end of my 14th year here at Eastern and we’ve been talking about the building since the first day on campus when I first arrived.”
ECSU’s new fine arts building is open

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came to interview for the job. So, it's nice to see it finally come to fruition.”

New instruments in the building include a black Steinway piano that is being donated by Susan McCray.

McCray is a retired casting director who worked for various shows, including Little House on the Prairie, while her husband, Kent McCray, is a retired Hollywood producer who worked on Bonanza and High Chaparral.

The couple has been patrons of the university’s theater program for many years.

“She’s (Susan McCray) giving us a significant donation,” Osborn said during the tour.

He said the piano will be installed permanently in the foyer, likely by Feb. 1.

A gala will be held in the building in April to recognize Susan McCray and her daughters.

Other features of the building include a 400-seat concert hall, 254-seat Proscenium theater, art gallery, painting studio, drawing studio, costume shop and performance labs, among many others.

Osborn said the fine arts building, as well as the science building, which opened in 2009, will “elevate” the university’s stature.

“We’re a public university,” he said. “We really want this to be seen as a public resource.”

Many events in the new building will be open to the public.

“We really want to encourage the local community to come to our events,” Osborn said.

Upcoming events include an art gallery exhibit, “In Place, In Time: Rediscovering the work of J. Alden Weir,” which began last Thursday and will run through Feb. 25.

The exhibit features 30 original photographs by T. Harrison Judah, a Windham photographer whose photos reveal visual and philosophical connections to the paintings of legendary Windham painter J. Alden Weir.

The new fine arts building on the Eastern Connecticut State University campus has a large theater.

A reception will be held at the exhibit on Thursday from 4 to 7 p.m. and an artist discussion will be held there on Jan. 28 from 4 to 5 p.m.

“The pieces will change,” said ECSU event coordinator John Beck.

Anne Dawson, an art history professor and chair of the art/art history department, curated the current exhibit.

Last week, she remarked that she was looking forward to working in the new building.

“It’s a wonderful space,” Dawson said. “It’s pretty fantastic.”

Exhibits in the art gallery will change frequently.

Another upcoming event in the building is “Music Colloquium,” during which poet and musician Ken Waldman will perform, in the choral rehearsal room, FAIC 110, on Friday from noon to 12:30 p.m.

Eastern Concert Chorale, Chamber Singers and Concert Band will perform during a concert Feb. 20 at 3 p.m. in the concert hall.

As students and staff settle into their new spaces in the fine arts building, plans are under way for the conversion of Shafer Hall into a residence hall with 90 beds.

Osborn said the goal is to complete architectural designs by late spring 2016, with construction possibly beginning in the fall.

He said residents are expected to move into the renovated building in January 2018.