

OTIS ELEVATOR DIVERSITY COUNCIL DINNER

Keynote Speech September 27, 2012

Thank you for being here tonight to help celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month and the work of the Hispanic Leadership Forum. I know we have people here from across the UTC family, especially those from Otis Elevator, as well as other guests tonight. I want to especially thank the United Way for the partnership they have with UTC, and the work they are doing across our country. Again, to all of you, thank you for supporting this event this evening.

I would like to thank Adriana Bacellar for inviting me to speak with you tonight. In addition to Ms. Bacellar, I want to thank Ms. Waterston, vice president of Human Resources at Otis Elevator, for that kind introduction. I also want to acknowledge the leadership team at Otis Elevator and United Technologies for the work they are doing to support diversity and service in the communities you do business in. Pedro Baranda, president of Otis Elevator, and Louis Chènevert, chairman and CEO of United Technologies, as well as the other members of your leadership team, are to be commended for the work the corporation and its individual companies are doing to ensure the diversity of your own workforce, as well as the support you provide your local communities. Finally, I want to thank your United Way partners for all the work they do in Connecticut and across our nation.

When you consider that UTC has 200,000 employees worldwide, you have an enormous impact on the quality of life of the people who work for you and the people you serve. I especially appreciate the first sentence found in the UTC Diversity Council's mission statement: "UTC is committed to maintaining a diverse workforce, creating an inclusive work environment, and leveraging the differences of all employees." At my university, one of our values is "inclusion," and we work every day to instill in our students an appreciation for the value of each person we encounter. I think the people who work and study on my campus would feel very much at home among the people of UTC. The work being celebrated tonight is a testament to how corporations can take leadership roles in being good citizens in their communities.

I am honored that Otis Elevator and UTC have selected the Dual College Enrollment Program at Eastern Connecticut State University as one of the two beneficiaries of tonight's dinner. Adding a college-level program to your existing support of the Pathways/Senderos program, which focuses on teenagers, is visionary and long-sighted. Supporting students throughout their educational journey is only going to improve their chances of success.

Before I tell you about our program, I want to talk about RoseAnne Bilodeau, the other recipient of your philanthropic support tonight. RoseAnne is a graduate of our university, so I am going to excuse myself and brag about her a little. Four years ago, Eastern awarded RoseAnne our Distinguished Alumni Award. She is richly deserving of this honor.

Almost 20 years ago, RoseAnne established the Pathways/Senderos Center in New Britain, to provide comprehensive, holistic services to low-income families, with a special focus to prevent teen pregnancy. "Diplomas before Diapers" in their motto—that is a powerful message, isn't it! The program includes academic support, career preparation, family life and sex education, recreation and lifetime sports, and health care and self-esteem enhancement. As RoseAnne herself has said, "We have created a center where children feel safe, welcomed and nurtured, so that learning and skill-building occur."

Stories like Pathways Senderos inspire all of us who arrive at work each day to try to change people's lives for the better. To have such a special person come from my University makes my heart soar. RoseAnne, thank you for being a beacon of hope for the teenagers you serve!

What RoseAnne is doing in New Britain to reduce teenage pregnancy is an important part of the bigger picture of expanding educational access and success across Connecticut and the nation. However, we cannot see this problem as exclusively or even chiefly an educational issue. We need to recognize all the systemic causes of low academic performance.

Socioeconomic status forms a huge part of the equation. Why? Because poverty is very much related to academic achievement. Numerous studies have documented the fact that students who come from impoverished families are more likely to have problems in school than students who come from middle-class or upper-class families. In the United States, the gaps in achievement among poor and advantaged students are substantial. Students from low income families consistently — regardless of ethnicity or race — score well below average on any number of tests. Let me reiterate that — the academic performance is a function of socio-economics, not ethnicity. There are many white families living in poverty in this country. Poverty is color blind — the same social and economic factors can be found in low-income white neighborhoods as they can be found in African American and Latino neighborhoods. I think everyone in this room understands the impact of structural racism in this country, but we must focus on the root social and economic causes of poverty in the broadest of terms if we are to be successful.

The distressing fact is that the number of children living in low-income families is increasing, and one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population are families with children. In 2007, 23 percent of all homeless people in our country were members of families with children. This trend is important because without dramatic intervention in our schools, the numbers of low-achieving students will likely increase as poverty grows. In the United States today, nearly 16 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty level. In Connecticut, that figure is 10.9 percent — or approximately 380,000 people. In 2001, the figure was 7.3 percent, a significant increase over a 10-year period. Fifteen percent of the children of Connecticut live in poverty; what is disturbing is this figure increased at an alarming rate from 2010 to 2011 — the fifth largest one-year increase in the nation.

Our schools measure the number of low income students through enrollment in the federal Free and Reduced Price Meals program. An income of \$40,793 for a family of four qualifies a student for reduced-price meals. In October 2009, just over 181,500 Connecticut public school K–12 students were enrolled in the Free and Reduced Price Meals program. In January 2012, more than 300,000 participated in the school lunch program.

In Connecticut, we have many communities that are economically challenged, and we also have many wealthy communities. This difference in economic levels contributes to a large achievement gap. Connecticut is a very wealthy state with some exceedingly prosperous towns like Greenwich, Avon and New Canaan. It is also home to a cluster of very poor cities. These include Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven, which are among the poorest 100 cities in the nation, based on the percentage of children living at or below the Federal Poverty level. Recent figures show that nearly 104,000 children in Connecticut are considered “poor” — and more than 50,000 of those are deemed to be living in extreme poverty. In Bridgeport, the percentage of people living below the poverty level is 26 percent. In New Haven, it's 30 percent. Right here in Hartford, it's 36 percent. Statewide, the poverty rate for Hispanics (27 percent) and African

Americans (23 percent) is significantly higher than the rate for White, non-Hispanic residents (6.2 percent).

We also have some very poor rural communities, like Windham, where Eastern is located. In fact, Windham ranks last among Connecticut towns in an index of income/wealth indicators. The poverty rate is 20.8 percent, more than twice the state and national averages. About 13 percent of families live below the poverty line, including almost 25 percent of those under age 18 and 10 percent of those ages 65 or over. Windham suffers from what is termed a “critically low level of food security.” It has the fourth-highest rate of participation in public food assistance programs in the state, and 76 percent of its students — that’s more than 2,300 students — qualify for free and reduced lunches. In addition, there were 139 homeless children attending Windham Public Schools in 2010. And that’s just in our small corner of the state.

In Hartford, 91 percent of the children are eligible for free lunch and 49,000 students were in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program in 2011-12. Overall, 19 percent of the children in Connecticut face “food insecurity,” the government’s term for hunger.

Poverty, hunger, lack of health insurance, and many other factors add up to a cycle that impacts the academic achievement of low-income minority students, largely living in our cities. As a result, they are the victims of what is called the “achievement gap” in this country.

When I say “achievement gap,” what exactly am I talking about? This gap refers to the difference between the test scores in reading and mathematics of public school students who are from low-income families compared with those from more affluent circumstances. Does family income make a difference in the achievement gap? Students in the top quartile of family income (more than \$108,000 a year) are **10 times** more likely to have completed their bachelor’s degree by age 24 than students whose families make less than \$36,000 a year.

Does location makes a difference? This achievement gap exists in every part of our nation — urban, suburban and rural. However, the data indicates that the achievement gap exists particularly in urban areas where a large proportion of minority and low-income citizens reside. African-American and Hispanic students are disproportionately affected by these gaps; however, it should also be noted that poor white students are also affected as well. It is important to acknowledge as well that not all Latinos are poor, that not all African Americans live in our cities, and that both groups are not inherently going to achieve academically at lower rates than their white counterparts. But as very clearly shown in the data, the Achievement Gap has disproportionately impacted students of color, inner-city students, and students from low-income families.

In Connecticut, this achievement gap is particularly disturbing because our state has the largest academic achievement gap among its schoolchildren in the entire nation. Here in Connecticut, by the fourth grade, low-income, urban, and minority students are performing 20 - 40 points below their white counterparts in writing, reading, math, and science, on National Assessment of Educational Progress (or NAEP) scores. What is most frustrating is that NEAP test scores among many low-income and minority students actually get worse the longer the kids are in school — our educational system is failing them. For instance, the gap between white, presumably more affluent students in Connecticut and their Latino and African American counterparts grows 4 to 6 points in reading, math and writing tests between the 4th and 9th grades. That puts our 4th- and 8th-grade low-income students, on average, about three grade levels behind non-low-income students in reading and math. Our low-income students also perform poorly when compared to low-income students from other states, where they rank in the bottom third of states in mathematics in grades 4 and 8.

What is the impact of this educational achievement gap? You can measure it in a number of ways. To the individual student, it means a life of struggle, of unrealized dreams, of lost income, and lost opportunities. We cannot expect a child to aspire to and become a scientist, engineer, or attorney when he or she consistently falls below the minimum threshold on reading, writing, and math skills, the basic ingredients for these professions. Many low-achieving students drop out of school, forfeiting the knowledge they need to join a skilled workforce. Last year, just 60 percent of Connecticut's low-income high school students graduated from high school, compared with 86 percent of their more affluent peers. Latinos and African-American students end up with significantly higher high school dropout rates, lower college attendance and graduation rates, and higher poverty rates than whites. African-American high school dropout rates are 50 percent higher than white students; Latino dropout rates are double those of white students. White adults are 50 percent more likely to have a college degree than African Americans and more than twice as likely as Latino adults. Finally, the poverty rate for Latinos and blacks is almost double that of whites in this nation.

Yet education can turn these students' lives around in terms of earning potential and personal income. The difference in the net fiscal contributions of a high school graduate vs. a high school dropout in Connecticut is \$518,000 over that person's lifetime. A college education is worth \$1 million in additional lifetime earnings over a high school diploma.

This gap is not only a tragedy for the children affected, it also impacts the state's unemployment rate, the quality of our workforce and the net fiscal contributions to our government. These have a negative impact on Connecticut's economy and competitiveness. In Connecticut, if we were to close the achievement gap and see Latino and African American college graduation rates at the levels of their white counterparts, it would generate \$8 billion in personal income for those graduates, and hundreds of millions of dollars of tax revenue for the state. Clearly, closing the achievement gap would improve Connecticut's economy and quality of life — for all of us.

So now let me spend a few minutes now talking about the Dual College Enrollment Program at Eastern. It is one of the ways that Eastern Connecticut State University is proactively addressing the achievement gap in Connecticut.

(In this part of the speech, Dr. Nunez talked extemporaneously about the Dual Enrollment Program.)

So I thank you for the work you are doing to promote diversity and support young people in pursuing their dreams of a college degree. I promise you that the support you are providing my University tonight will go directly towards assisting our dual enrollment students.

Thank you for being part of this labor of love. Your generosity tonight will make a very real difference in the lives of teenagers and college-age students throughout Connecticut. So bid generously and often at tonight's auction.

Again, thank you for having me as your keynote speaker this evening, thank you for the work you are doing in your own organizations and in your communities, and God Bless You!