

**President Núñez
State of the University Address
August 23, 2016**

Good morning! It is wonderful to see everyone again as we kick off the new academic year. With classes starting next Monday, I know how busy you are today and how busy the rest of this week will be. Thank you for taking time to be here.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I would like to welcome our new faculty and staff to campus. We have 24 new colleagues with us this fall. Would all of the new faculty and staff stand up one more time? (APPLAUSE)

We are very pleased that you have joined this community, and we want you to feel welcomed. I hope each of you finds your new role at Eastern to be rewarding and you soon feel at home.

Each year at this meeting I give the State of the University address. It is an opportunity for me to share some of the great things occurring on this campus; to bring current challenges we may be facing to your attention so you can help me shape responses to these challenges and to get our academic year started on a positive note.

However, it is important that today I speak first about our core identity as Connecticut's only public liberal arts university.

All of the great things we do on this campus, all of the challenges we face, all of the dreams we have for our future are grounded in our mission as a public liberal arts university. We do **what we do** because of **who we are**.

And who we are, it turns out, can be traced back to the beginnings of our great nation. Our founding fathers were clear that access to public education should be promoted by the government to protect our democracy.

In his book, "Beyond the University, Why Liberal Education Matters," President Michael Roth of Wesleyan University quotes Thomas Jefferson, who wrote that publicly supported education was necessary "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom," so that learned people would (in Roth's words) have "the capacity of independent judgment."

Jefferson went to William & Mary; John Adams attended Harvard; James Madison went to what is now Princeton; and Alexander Hamilton attended college at what is now Columbia University. They were all products of a liberal education! I don't think it is a stretch to say that Jefferson and his peers were in a way advocating for "publicly" supported liberal education, the very form of a college education we teach today at Eastern.

And, whereas Jefferson, Madison, Adams and their peers attended private colleges, over time we have developed a system of public higher education in this country that is the envy of the world. There is no better System of Higher Education in the world than ours. Your mother can clean toilets and you can go to Harvard. It serves as the engine for social equity and economic mobility for everyone in our country, not just the privileged.

Whether we think of the surge in public university enrollments in the 1950s, spawned by the GI Bill, or the growth of community colleges in the 1960s, we have worked hard to create an egalitarian system of "public" higher education in America.

Today, in response to the focus our students have on being gainfully employed, higher education faces increasing pressure to focus on preparing students for professional careers, and giving them the tools to manage the technological changes that are part of our daily lives.

We are certainly meeting that challenge at Eastern. We know that a liberal education prepares our graduates for career success in whatever profession they choose.

National surveys continue to show that the majority of employers believe that critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills are more important than a student's major; those are the core abilities taught across our liberal arts curriculum. And we can be confident that a liberal education prepares our students to adapt in a world of change. As Michael Roth puts it, "A broad, wide-ranging education is the best way to be able to shape technological change, rather than being victimized by it."

But we are more than that. Gathering and analyzing data, organizing one's thoughts, and articulate them civilly are not just professional skills, they are citizenship skills. Our students can distinguish fact from opinion. They understand that most issues facing mankind are complex, not simple. They realize that the answers to the world's problems are nuanced, not black and white.

Armed with these intellectual skills, our students are ready to be the independent thinkers envisioned 240 years ago by Thomas Jefferson — future citizen leaders who can maintain and protect our democracy.

That, my friends, is ultimately why we come to work each day. **Developing citizen leaders to protect our freedoms is the core reason we are here at Eastern and we have to remind each other of that fact.** Our work is extremely important to this state and to this nation. This work fundamentally gives meaning to every award we win, every challenge we face, and every plan we have for tomorrow.

So, in that context, let me share some good news with you. For the seventh time, Eastern has been named a "Great College to Work For" by the Chronicle of Higher Education. We were the only public four-year institution in New England to achieve this recognition. Let me repeat that. **Eastern was the only public four-year institution in New England to achieve this recognition!**

And for the second year in a row, we also were named to the Great Colleges Honor Roll, **one of only 42 schools in the nation.**

I know that this and other national recognitions we continue to receive may feel like "old hat," but please don't let yourself become numb to these awards. They are important reminders that we are on the right track. Such recognitions speak volumes for how we conduct ourselves, how we work together, and our capacity to solve problems together, meet goals, and respond to challenges. I thank all of you for all you do for our students. I thank you for being positive members of the Eastern community. Getting the Great Colleges award isn't easy — even once! — and our ability to garner this recognition on a recurring basis speaks to the **standard of excellence** found throughout this campus.

We use that same commitment to excellence to innovate and make progress in our academic programs. This academic year, we are launching a new criminology major and three new minors in insurance, environmental health and bioinformatics. The criminology major aligns with the Transfer/Career Pathways degree in Connecticut's 12 community colleges, and all four of these new programs speak to emerging or high-demand occupations in Connecticut.

I want to thank William Lugo, Theresa Severance, Nick Parsons and all of our colleagues in our Sociology, Social Work and Geography Department for their work in getting the criminology major approved, and all the faculty who worked on our three new minors.

The CREATE conference on our campus this past spring was the largest ever, with almost 300 students participating. We would love for that number to be 1,000 and someday, it will be.

On the national stage, we were again well represented at the annual national Conference on Undergraduate Research, and an Eastern student represented Connecticut for the fifth time in the past decade at the Posters on the Hill Conference in Washington, DC. **No other school in Connecticut has represented the state more than twice in that period.**

On campus, we continue to expand our Work Hub, which provides paid and for-credit internships to students as they work for a variety of private and nonprofit organizations.

CIGNA was our first Work Hub partner and continues to provide an outstanding career track for Eastern students. Last year we added Neighborhood Bridges and Camp Horizons, and this fall we will be bringing Jackson Labs to campus.

Another way we engage students is through the Center for Community Engagement, which continues to support students in their work in the community. Just one example, but an important one, is the Jumpstart early literacy program that is doing important work in bilingual Willimantic; 41 Eastern students contributed 6,000 hours alone to this project last year.

All these initiatives are part of our commitment to providing Eastern students with a host of applied learning opportunities. That is our modern take on the liberal education our founding fathers received—our students practice what they learn in class so that they can compete and thrive in the 21st century.

Eastern's student athletes are also demonstrating their academic abilities. **This summer, it was announced that Eastern has won the Little East Conference's President's Cup the second straight year and the third time in the cup's existence.** Our student-athletes had the highest cumulative GPA ever in the program!

Eastern student-athletes were also successful on the field. Our baseball and women's basketball teams went to NCAA regional tournaments, several students were All-Americans, our ice hockey team won its division in New England, and our club rugby team was fourth in the nation. **Go Warriors!**

So that is just some of our **good news.** These accomplishments are testimony to the collective strength of our institution and the capacity we have to do even better things. And that is my charge to you today. Far from being complacent, we need to use our talent and time to tackle some very real issues at Eastern. And I am confident we have the capacity and resolve to meet these challenges.

There are **four pressure points** I want to share with you today that create challenges for us. I am sharing these with you to seek your input and support as we address these challenges together. They are: (1) enrollment, (2) retention, (3) assessment, and (4) fiscal management.

The first pressure point is **enrollment.** Two years ago, I spoke at this same University Meeting about a decline in enrollments we were experiencing that fall, the result of a shift in demographics that continues to today, and will continue for the next eight to ten years. Simply put, the size of high school graduating classes in Connecticut—and throughout the Northeast—is declining. The pool of potential applicants is getting smaller, and the competition for those students is growing.

This campus community aggressively responded to the challenge. Faculty launched new majors and minors. Our admissions staff created new outreach opportunities. New marketing technologies were implemented.

This past year, we saw stable enrollments, and this past spring, we were the only member of the state system to have an enrollment increase. This fall, I can report to you enrollment is close to one percent.

This may seem like a modest increase—and it is—but when you consider that so many public and private institutions are struggling to make their enrollment goals, the fact we have an increase at all is commendable. It is also worth noting that both our freshman and sophomore classes are larger — the sophomore class by 7 percent! — so we are heading in the right direction.

I want to thank Chris Dorsey and his team in the Admissions Office, as well as everyone else on campus who contributes to bringing in new students to Eastern.

I share this data with you so that you know we are making progress in enrolling students. But the demographic shift I described two years ago hasn't changed, and won't for another decade. That means the pool of potential students who could apply to Eastern will continue to decline during that time.

Therefore, as well as we are doing in maintaining enrollments at Eastern, we cannot ease up. We must continue to find opportunities to create new academic programs and discover other potential sources of students. We must continue to strengthen our transfer pathways with Connecticut's community colleges. And we need to continue to seek new marketing strategies.

Getting students in the door is just the first step. As we know, retaining students is as important as bringing them here in the first place.

A year ago, the focus on my State of the University address was **retention**. We all understand the importance of retaining students—to support their career aspirations, to support institutional outcome measures and to manage our costs— knowing that it takes money to bring in new students to replace those who are not retained.

I know that many people on this campus are working hard to implement new strategies to help us retain students.

Yet despite our “Eastern in 4” program, our use of new software platforms such as WebFOCUS to support advising and retention efforts, and increases in the number of students receiving merit and need-based aid, we have been unable to move the bar upward when it comes to retaining freshmen into their sophomore year.

I am not telling you this to place blame or to discourage anyone. The fact is, all of us are responsible for retaining students, and it is in our mutual interest—working as a team—to find incremental ways in which we can improve our retention rates.

If we can do that, our graduation rates will improve, more of our students will fulfill their aspirations, and our overall reputation and institutional stability will improve.

I have no magic formula on retention. All I know is that we have more work to do and I encourage all of you to participate in the retention initiatives we have in place this coming year.

We know that finances are a big issue with retention, and we are continuing to refine our approach to targeting financial aid to support students who are most likely to stay. We are also doing a better job advising and working with students who struggle academically. The biggest issue—and I have raised it before—is to help students find a home at Eastern—before they end up transferring to UConn and other beckoning schools. Whether you teach in a department, work in residential life, advise a student club, or interact with students in another way, each of you has the opportunity to help each of our students make a lifelong connection to Eastern.

I speak with alumni all the time. They tell me Eastern is where they learned to think critically, and where they gained confidence to articulate their opinions. When you add that

common bond to the lifelong relationships our students make at Eastern, our alumni represent a powerful, enduring community.

This past May, I spoke of our third pressure point — **assessment**. At that time, three faculty members, Wendi Everton, Bill Salka, Darren Robert, joined me in sharing with you our plan to focus the next few years on assessing student outcomes.

Let me remind you: there are **three dimensions to our assessment challenge**. We are approaching our next **accreditation self-study**, and NEASC will be very interested to see the progress we are making on assessing student outcomes on our campus.

In particular — and this was a point the NEASC visiting team made in their exit report— NEASC has asked us to improve how we measure the student learning taking place in our **Liberal Arts Core**. Margaret Letterman and her colleagues on the Liberal Arts Program Committee are already working on that important task.

The third dimension of our assessment challenge looks beyond our accreditation cycle as we to seek to **institutionalize assessment**, much as they have done at our COPLAC sister school, Truman State in Missouri.

To that end, Darren Robert and the ad hoc committee that he and Maryanne Clifford co-chaired this summer on assessment will be bringing a bill to the University Senate this fall to lead us forward on this critical issue.

At the same time this is all happening on our campus, Eastern is also showing leadership at the national level, as we continue to participate in the Multi-State Collaborative Project. I have spoken before on this important initiative, which was piloted in Massachusetts. It is faculty-led, and uses the artifacts of student work as the basis for assessing student learning. The key is that faculty from other participating states will assess our students' work, as our faculty assess the work of students who do not study in Connecticut. As we move forward on this national project, it is my hope we can adapt what we learn to help improve the overall assessment program at Eastern. And that, in turn, will strengthen the liberal education we provide.

We can maintain steady enrollments, increase our retention rates, and do a better job of assessing learning outcomes on our campus. However, with declining state appropriations, if we don't balance our budget, all that good work will take a back seat. Therefore the issue of **financial management** is an important fourth and last challenge I want to share with you today.

First, on a positive note, I can tell you that we able to add to our reserve balance this past year, even after absorbing two reductions to our state appropriations during the year.

However, everyone is well aware from the news media that the economic and financial stability of Connecticut continues to be tenuous. As a result, we have received a reduction in funding for FY 2017 of \$1.2 million from the amount we received in FY 2016. We are also expecting to receive approximately \$600,000 less in fringe benefit funding.

Reductions in state funding seem to be the new state fiscal reality. I feel we are fortunate to be able to create a budget for this year that maintains our existing staffing levels and preserves our operating expense budget at FY 2016 levels, despite the reduction in state funding.

Our budget for this year is \$136 million. State funding state amounts to \$52.3 million, or just 38 percent of the total. As I have stated before, the majority of our revenue is derived from student tuition, fees, housing, and food services.

This revenue of \$136 million is \$1.22 million higher than last year, based on projected stable enrollment and an increase of \$484 per year in tuition and fees for in-state students.

The budget includes limited hiring of additional faculty in academic departments and facilities personnel to support the first full year of operations for the Fine Arts Instructional Center.

Operating expenses have been budgeted at the same level as FY 2016 and represents an increase of approximately \$1 million over actual 2016 expense levels.

We are blessed to be able to begin the new fiscal year with a balanced budget without an impact on our staffing. However we should be keenly aware of the possibility that the state will once again ask for a rescission at some point during the year and we must be ready to respond if they do. I ask you to continue to use fiscal restraint as we focus on the needs of our students and campus safety.

We have balanced our budget and built up our reserves over the 10 years of my administration because each of you has taken this challenge to heart, working to find cost savings, discovering ways to stretch your budgets, and making do with what we have. I cannot thank you enough for collectively helping to manage our financial resources. (APPLAUSE) I especially want to thank the Ad Hoc Budget committee for all their support and guidance.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that the chief way we have been able to balance our budget these past few years is by holding open literally dozens of positions. Everyone who is part of this campus community works harder and juggles multiple tasks because we don't have a complete complement of staff and faculty. It is not hyperbole to call it a personal sacrifice on your part, yet each of you does your work without complaint as you continue to pull your own weight and more. Again, **thank you!**

All this work is fundamentally about graduating students who will protect this great Democracy. Who we are as an institution and the fundamental role we play in providing a liberal education is critical to this state and country. As a public liberal arts university, we provide a special form of education to students from all backgrounds. It is at the center of all we do, and it should be a source of tremendous pride for all of us.

This past month, my husband and I visited the Balkan countries of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia. We saw firsthand the legacy of the terrible Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, and the impact that religious and ethnic intolerance has had on the people of that region. It was a very moving experience and my heart broke as I witnessed countries still slowly recovering from the violent warfare that scorched their lands only 20 years ago.

I could not help thinking how our own country differs from so much of the world. We are a nation that values cultural and ethnic diversity and supports religious freedom. Our democracy remains a beacon of hope on this planet, a place where political freedom, economic mobility, technological innovation, and cultural creativity all go hand in hand. And it is our system of public education that forms the foundation of our freedoms, our social order, and our progress.

There is no better time to acknowledge and celebrate the role a liberal education can play than now, as we continue our national dialog in preparation for electing a new president of the United States and other public officials this November.

As we listen to the various candidates and their positions, as well as the impassioned feedback and response from the electorate, the citizenship skills taught on this campus come into clear focus.

When I see and hear the campaign rhetoric of the day—patently false allegations; personal attacks; emotionally charged diatribes—the first thing I think of is—“That's not how we teach our students to behave!” The second thing I think is, “What a case for liberal education in this country!”

I think our students could teach a thing or two about how to analyze what you hear, sifting through the rhetoric to reveal deeper meaning.

Because of our strong faculty, our students have the ability to conduct research, write down their thoughts, and share their opinions publicly and civilly, skills that will serve them well in the many formal and informal debates and discussions that are going to occur on our campus in the next two months around the Presidential election. I look forward to them raising concerns, questioning the status quo, and responding to the national party platforms. And those on-campus experiences will prepare them when they graduate to become tomorrow's citizen leaders as part of our self-governed democracy.

It is no accident that the Latin root for the words "liberty" and "liberal" (as in liberal education) is the same — liber — or "free." When fully engaged in our democracy, the free thinkers we nurture on this campus and their peers across our country are the best assurance we have of maintaining our freedoms.

Our institution is strong—we have much evidence of that. We are prepared to meet the challenges before us.

In doing so, we will strengthen our ability to enhance the liberal education our students receive. At the end of the day, our graduates will be better positioned to be the leaders this nation so desperately needs. They can become part of the world order of the future, where democracy may be more prevalent, and where educated, informed people use their knowledge and values to talk through and resolve issues peacefully.

We are not a large campus. But we can do our part, knowing that the transformation that occurs in each of our students can be the seed for positive change in the communities they live in. As I walk around our campus, and see our students engaged in SGA, in student clubs, and out in the community, I see living proof each day of a promising future. I believe in them. Our hope lies with these young, bright minds and souls, and I am confident they will make us proud.

Thank you.