Eastern students, faculty and staff volunteers take a break during the 2011 Annual Day of Giving at the Hurley Hall Dining Room.

Willimantic, CT - Eastern Connecticut State University was honored by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the U.S. Department of Education on March 12 as one of the nation's colleges and universities that are leading the way in bettering their communities through community service and service learning.

While 642 institutions of higher learning were acknowledged on President Obama's "Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll," Eastern was one of only 110 schools in the country to be admitted to the special honor roll category, "With Distinction," for their work in serving local communities through volunteer programs and other activities. Of 14 colleges and universities in Connecticut who made the honor roll, Eastern was joined only by the University of Connecticut in the "with distinction" category.

"Community service has been a hallmark at Eastern since our earliest days in the 1890s as the Willimantic State Normal School," said Eastern President Elsa Núñez. "Today, our Center for Community Engagement works closely with our faculty to ensure that the service that our students perform in local communities aligns with their academic programs. In providing thousands of hours a year of service to dozens of social agencies and nonprofits, Eastern students are demonstrating their social responsibility while learning valuable professional and organizational skills. To be recognized by President Obama as a university that exemplifies such service is something that everyone on our campus should be proud of."

"This is a tremendous honor for Eastern, its faculty, staff and students," said Robert Kennedy, president of the Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education. "While students attend an institution of higher education, in many cases, to advance their career options, it is becoming increasingly important for students to have real-life, demonstrable skills in areas outside the classroom, as well. Eastern's emphasis on community service will encourage their students to become engaged, active citizens upon their graduation as they become productive members of the workforce and their local communities."
Eastern students Calvin Underwood, Tom Przybylek and Todd Mitnick worked with counselors at Camp Sequanota in Pennsylvania to build a new bridge during spring break 2012.

"I offer my congratulations to the students and faculty at Eastern for being named to President Obama's prestigious 2012 Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll with Distinction," said U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal. "Eastern's continued dedication to improving the community using skills learned in the classroom makes the state proud."

To better coordinate student service projects in the community, Eastern's Center for Community Engagement (CCE) was launched in September 2009. The center is staffed by a full-time director, administrative assistant and two AmeriCorps VISTA members. The center also provides leadership opportunities through federal work-study for students.

One emerging Eastern service tradition is the "Day of Giving," which is held on the day before Thanksgiving each year. For five years in a row, more than 450 needy individuals and families have been served a Thanksgiving meal in the University's dining hall. This is a collaborative effort between students, faculty, administrators, contractors and service providers in the community to ensure that people who might otherwise go without a Thanksgiving meal are served with dignity and respect. More than 100 volunteers from across the campus, including student servers and staff from the University's food service provider, come together to cook, serve, clean up and provide transportation for anyone in the local community who would like to attend. In addition to the Thanksgiving meal, students work with local grocery stores to gather canned goods -- more than 5,000 items were delivered to soup kitchens and food pantries this past year.

Another example of the University's culture of service is Eastern's "Town Pride, Town Wide," a university and community collaboration in the spring of each year that provides volunteers to clean, paint, rake, plant flowers and otherwise beautify local towns. Hundreds of students come out to help and work alongside community members, faculty and administrators to provide a spring cleaning where it is most needed. Thousands of volunteer hours are donated in this effort, which has brought a fresh spring look to such towns as Willimantic and Coventry.

One new service project was the Math Mania summer camp in summer 2011 for more than 20 middle school students that augments the University's Math Brigade tutorial program in the local middle school.

An example of how service to the community is tied directly to classroom coursework is "We-Care-Info.org," a database-driven website for sharing information among local non-profits to
improve their efficiency and effectiveness in serving people in need. It was created and
implemented by Eastern's Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP) student
club members under the direction of faculty advisor Alex Citurs. The website is used by staff
and volunteers of 10 participating local nonprofits as well as hundreds of local citizens and other
nonprofits to locate available assistance services.

In all, Eastern students, faculty and staff donate upwards of 44,000 hours of time annually to
local communities, a value of $1.3 million annually. "We applaud the Honor Roll schools, their
faculty and students for their commitment to make service a priority in and out of the classroom.
Together, service and learning increase civic engagement while fostering social innovation
among students, empowering them to solve challenges within their communities," said Robert
Velasco, acting CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS).

"Preparing students to participate in our democracy and providing them with opportunities to
take on local and global issues in their coursework are as central to the mission of education as
boosting college completion and closing the achievement gap," said Eduardo Ochoa, assistant
secretary for postsecondary education in the U.S. Department of Education. "The Honor Roll
schools should be proud of their work to elevate the role of service-learning on their
campuses. Galvanizing their students to become involved in projects that address pressing
concerns and enrich their academic experience has a lasting impact - both in the communities in
which they work and on their own sense of purpose as citizens of the world. I hope we'll see
more and more colleges and universities following their lead."

The President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll recognizes higher education
institutions that reflect the values of exemplary community service and achieve meaningful
outcomes in their communities. Inspired by the thousands of college students who traveled
across the country to support relief efforts along the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, the
initiative celebrates the transformative power and volunteer spirit that exists within the higher
education community.

On campuses across the country, millions of college students are engaged in innovative projects
to meet local needs, often using the skills learned in classrooms. In 2010, 3.1 million college
students dedicated more than 312 million hours of service to communities across the country,
value at more than $6.6 billion. Business and law students offer tax preparation and
legal services, and college student volunteers provide meals, create parks, rebuild homes after
disasters, conduct job training, run senior service programs, and much more.

The CNCS oversees the Honor Roll in collaboration with the U.S. Departments of Education and
Housing and Urban Development, Campus Compact and the American Council on Education.
Honorees are chosen based on a series of selection factors, including the scope and innovation of
service projects, the extent to which service-learning is embedded in the curriculum, the school's
commitment to long-term campus-community partnerships, and measurable community
outcomes as a result of the service.