

The State of the University Address
President Elsa M. Núñez
University Meeting
August 29, 2008

Greetings, everyone! It is great to see all of you again, hopefully renewed and refreshed as we start the 2008–2009 academic year. In addition to those of you returning to campus, I want to recognize all the new faculty and staff who have joined the Eastern family for the first time. Welcome to Eastern!

This is my second annual State of the University Address, and I am delighted to have this opportunity to give you an update on Eastern’s progress. Today I plan to spend my time speaking to you about three areas: our budget, our facility expansion activities, and our strategic plan — a review, if you will, of our fiscal resources, our physical resources, and our vision for the future.

As I thought about today’s meeting and why we are all here, I realized that, of course, each of you is here because you believe in Eastern and the education that we offer. But I think it is worth a moment of reflection to remind ourselves why we want to become a better, stronger university. Think this through with me. As we seek to become a University of First Choice, we are putting into place strategies that will help us make a more substantial contribution to our community and our state, even making a modest contribution to the health of our entire nation. We have the power to add to what has been a tradition of innovation and inventiveness in our great state of Connecticut. In his recent book, “The Tycoons,” Charles Morris writes about the many innovations that were created in or fostered in Connecticut that have resulted in economic prosperity for our state — the munitions giants Colt and Remington; Carrier air conditioners; Sikorsky; and the submarine industry, to name just a few of the more noteworthy examples. And let’s not forget that the American Thread Company here in Willimantic was the largest manufacturing operation in the world in the late 1890s. Many of these companies are still here and others have joined our state economy. These companies were created and developed by many creative, hardworking people, people who had a vision and put it into action. These individuals had the skills – intellectual and practical – to see their vision come to fruition.

We are here today to launch our students on a new academic year, to give them every opportunity to develop their intellectual capacities in a liberal arts environment, so they can be critical thinkers and strong writers while developing their creativity. I do believe part of our job at Eastern is to empower our students to find their own creativity within and have the confidence to discover their own vision.

At the same time that the ingenuity and hard work of our graduates can impact our state economy, the education we provide has broader social implications. I think all of us recognize one of the major problems facing our country today is the low level of educational performance being achieved by our nation’s youth. It appears we are moving backwards in our attempts to educate people from all walks of life. At Eastern, the gap in our six-year graduation rate between African-Americans and whites is widening. In our local high school, the dropout rate for Hispanics and African-American students is two to three times that of white students. The same gap exists when all of Connecticut is considered.

At the national level, U.S. Department of Education data show that only 70 percent of students earn their diplomas within four years — that is all students, regardless of background.

You ask yourself: “Why is this the case?” The answers are complex as we all know, and each of us no doubt has a theory or two on the issue.

Another disturbing sign is the indicators that young males are performing at much lower levels than their female counterparts. U. S. Department of Education data indicate that boys perform at lower levels than girls across most school subjects, earn lower grades, and have higher dropout rates. This gender gap is occurring in urban and rural schools alike and across the socio-economic spectrum. At the college level, the percentage of women enrolled and the percentage of degrees awarded is approaching 60 percent of the total, another sign of the gender gap. At Eastern, only 45 percent of our undergraduate population is male, and the number continues to decline.

A further concern is the low educational attainment of our fastest-growing population sector. Even though half the growth in our nation’s population in the first half of this decade came from 7.5 million new Latino residents, Hispanics have the lowest college completion rate (12 percent) of any group in the country. It has been 12 percent or lower for the past 25 years; we have not made any gains.

Public higher education has a responsibility to attract and support the success of students from diverse backgrounds, especially first-generation college students who struggle to break the education barrier. At Eastern, we can do our part. Each of you can think of moments when a student, regardless of their background, has discovered the power of knowledge and the liberating freedom of being able to think, reason, analyze, and solve problems. It is wonderful to see that development in our students. One student at a time, one small success at a time, we can be part of the task of educating our nation’s people and changing the data that I just cited. As Robert Kennedy noted, “*Few will ever have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events . . . it is from numberless acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped.*” You — each of you — does this each time you work with one student and he or she is empowered to succeed at Eastern.

That is why we do what we do here at Eastern, motivated by the transformational power of higher education. It is my own story, and it is the story of so many of you. It is against this backdrop of hope that I want to talk today about our future.

First of all, our fiscal resources. With all that has been announced in the news over the past several months concerning Connecticut’s state budget, I wanted to share current information about our own budget with you. Our country’s current economic doldrums have certainly affected state budgets across the nation. Here in Connecticut, Governor Rell has introduced a number of cost-cutting measures that Chancellor Carter has committed to implementing. The Governor has imposed a three percent cut in the 2008–2009 Connecticut State University System allocation. While she has not indicated she will cut more, she could theoretically increase the cut to as much as five percent of our appropriation. In addition, the Chancellor has voluntarily agreed to implement a hiring freeze — Eastern now follows a system-wide review process to gain the Chancellor’s approval for exceptions to hire any full- or part-time personnel. Finally, restrictions remain in place on out-of-state travel in order to show real reductions in travel expenses over time.

These are times to be cautious, but Eastern has been here before. While I do not know how long this fiscal tightening will last, I do know that it will pass. In the meantime, we must move ahead. It would be foolish to halt all of our work and not actively participate in moving Eastern forward.

In addition to your own diligence in managing your budgets wisely, this is also a time to be creative in reallocating the resources we have. This summer we temporarily reassigned someone in the Admissions Office to the Advising Center in recognition of where the demand was for service. In addition, through prudent fiscal management by Rhona Free and John Sweeney, we were able to reallocate existing resources to create five new full-time faculty positions this past year. This has added additional lines to our base. I could not believe it when they presented the plan to me. This is not easy to do, but we did it! This is extremely noteworthy, given the fiscal condition of the state. These are just a few examples of how we can use our ingenuity to reallocate existing resources. We will continue to look for such redeployment opportunities.

We are also seeking cost savings and alternative revenue sources at Eastern. For example, since 2004, Eastern has earned more than \$475,600 from the rental of cell tower space. The University also has recovered more than \$486,000 from the Income Tax Intercept Program since its inception in 2006. On the expense side, the implementation of the System-led electric purchasing program and growing savings from campus-based conservation efforts is expected to reduce electricity expenses by nearly 25 percent for the coming year.

It is amazing to see what individual members of this community have accomplished in terms of additional revenues. Through the efforts of Bill Leahy, the Institute for Sustainable Energy will receive a \$2 million appropriation from the state over the next three years. This is added to our base. Carmen Cid and the Project Compass team have brought almost \$1 million to Eastern from the Nellie Mae Foundation to support our retention and graduation efforts. Jeffrey Trawick-Smith and his team received \$4 million in funding for Early Childhood Education. These three teams will bring in \$7 million to Eastern over the next three years. These are fabulous accomplishments for a small institution like Eastern.

In addition, we continue to receive wonderful support from the Chancellor and the Board of Trustees. Despite the pinch on the state budget, Chancellor Carter and the Board of Trustees have funded the seven additional staff needed to operate and maintain the new Science Building. These new staff members are an addition to our current levels of staffing, and these positions are also added to our base.

All of you know about the System's "funding formula." The Connecticut State University System Board of Trustees also has made two major changes to the way in which state funds are allocated to Eastern. These changes address the integrity of the funding formula and the inequities that have negatively impacted our budget. The changes are to be implemented over a number of years, and will increase funds flowing to the University by more fairly allocating state dollars for Eastern's institutional costs while System Office expenses are more fairly distributed among the four schools. These new funds, when fully implemented, will result in more than \$1 million in additional funds for Eastern each year, funds that will be invaluable in helping Eastern continue its plans to become a University of First Choice. These new funds will support the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

Private fundraising through the Office of Institutional Advancement also continues to reach new heights. Over the past five years, our total donor base has doubled to more than 2,200 donors. Of the 2,225 donors this past fiscal year, 1,150 were alumni — the greatest number of alumni donors in our history! Eastern raised a record \$6 million in Fiscal Year 2008. When we exclude bequests, the annual fund still raised a record \$1,250,000. These dollars are being used

for scholarships, faculty travel, and athletics. I want to thank each of you for your checks and your generosity.

All of these new revenue sources, as well as our own creativity in reallocating existing resources, should empower us as we move forward. Let us think positively — even with the financial challenges facing the state and all state agencies, this University has the ability to tighten its belt and work this coming year in the black! We need to see the fiscal challenges facing Eastern as nothing more than short-term constraints. In the long term, we are in great fiscal shape! So, in summary, our financial picture is good, and we will be able to realize our dreams and vision.

The second item I want to share with you is the status of our physical resources, and the progress being made on our various campus construction projects. The most exciting news to report is that our new, 174,000-square-foot Science Building will spring to life in a few days. With new labs and new technology, this first-class facility will open up a whole new world for our faculty and students. We all should be very grateful to the Governor and the General Assembly for making this a reality. If you have not dropped by the building, please do so. Words cannot describe the beauty and promise of this new facility. Science at Eastern has truly leaped into the 21st century! The faculty knows it, and the students will experience it!

Another change you will notice this fall is that our residence halls are bursting at the seams. We have had an unprecedented level of interest this year in on-campus housing, both from freshmen and returning students. For the first time, we are the First Choice University for many students. We have tipped the scales; the majority of our students are now saying that Eastern is their first choice. Our housing staff and others have worked long and hard this summer to maintain communications with students and parents. Adding more beds on campus and finding other alternatives were also part of the process of managing housing supply and demand. The result is that we have been able to find room for all new and returning students, although we have had to resort to tripling in a few rooms.

In the long term, our need for more residential space is being addressed by the Master Plan, which I am going to discuss more fully in a moment. The bottom line is, we need more student housing.

We had further good news earlier this month when Governor Rell announced the first release of funds for the CSUS 2020 program, including the design funds for our new Fine Arts Instructional Center. I can see some smiling faces among our performing and visual arts faculty — CONGRATULATIONS! Will the faculty from Performing and Visual Arts please stand. They have waited a long time for this moment!

Our new police station and a second parking garage are also in the works, and will be built this year. You will soon see the cranes on campus again! The 8,500-square-foot police facility should be ready by fall 2009. With this addition of much-needed space and upgraded communications technology, our campus police department can continue serving our campus community while also performing vital community policing functions. The parking garage will be an important addition as we continue to seek ways to reclaim green space on campus. Many parking lots will be converted to green space. It will be the initial phase of the greening of the campus.

This month I had a wonderful meeting with Nancy Tinker, Dennis Hannon, and two landscape architects. I saw for the first time the renderings for a grand new entrance to Eastern. The small brown house on the left as you come in and the existing police station will be

demolished, and all the parking lots behind them will disappear into green space. Imagine a new entrance, with trees lining both sides of the existing roadways, tall grasses in the middle, leading you inward as you go under an archway, which we are in the process of designing. All this will happen next summer with the goal of having our grand entrance ready for fall 2009. This will be the first phase of the implementation of the Master Plan, one that will signal the transition from a commuter college to a liberal arts college campus.

I hope this review of our budget and campus expansion plans has given you a better sense of our capacity to move forward. I want to spend the rest of my time this morning giving you an update on the progress being made by our Strategic Plan Implementation Teams. The Steering Committee is being co-chaired by Dr. Peter Bachiochi, professor of psychology, and Dr. Patricia Kleine, dean of the School of Education and Professional Studies. We have solid leadership at the helm.

Two words come to mind in describing their work — Coherence and Convergence. Eastern has long been a coherent organization, and I am proud to have joined it. Webster's dictionary defines "coherence" as the "integration of diverse elements, relationships or values"; "to become united in principles, relationships, or interests"; and (I love this one) "the act of sticking together."

You can see cohesion in our core values — they have a natural integration, in that they reflect the authentic experiences of the people who teach, study, and work on this campus every day, both individually and collectively. Dr. Richard Jones-Bamman and Dr. Constance Belton-Green did an incredible job leading the community in the development and adoption of Eastern's Core Values.

We can see cohesion between our values and our vision for the future. For instance, you can find a relationship between core values such as Engagement and Social Responsibility and the proposed Center for Community Engagement. Our value of Empowerment can be found in such initiatives as the Student Success Center and the Liberal Arts Core, just to name a couple. This alignment between who we say we are and how we conduct our daily business is a matter of organizational integrity. This is no small matter. Organizations that align their actions with their values, whose vision for the future reflects their principles and beliefs, can weather any storm, overcome any obstacle, solve any problem. It begins with me, and it includes each of you. When we stick together as a team, we have stronger personal relationships with individual colleagues. Because our vision is coherent and our plan is integrated, we have a stronger commitment to our shared future and the students we serve. We sense a greater capacity, not only to implement new ideas, but also to meet the challenges before us.

I urge everyone here today to think of how our daily lives intersect, how you can gain strength by connecting your ideas with those of your colleagues, and how we can articulate the unity of purpose found on our campus. This takes effort, but it is something I really encourage you to consider.

The second word I would use to describe our work is "convergence." Webster's defines "convergence" as "to come together or unite in a common interest or focus" or "moving toward one point or approaching each other." We have 18 strategic initiatives, all starting from different points in time, all with different resource needs, all with varying mixtures of established and newer ideas, all with different incubation periods. Some can be realized quickly, others will take more time. The five-year cycle incorporated into our Strategic Plan is something we have to become comfortable with; just remember, we don't have to have all this done by December!

Indeed, all of our 18 strategic initiatives are moving forward, yet each has its own evolution. Over the next five years, as our vision is fully implemented, the result will be a more robust, more complete, and more effective University. So let us look at some of our strategic initiatives and how they are evolving. I think you will be pleased with the progress.

The first initiative of the Strategic Plan that I want to talk about is the Master Plan, the vision for improving the alignment between our physical plant and our public liberal arts mission. I think all of us understand the importance of having a first-class campus if we want to achieve our vision as a University of First Choice.

Mr. Hannon gave you a thorough briefing on the plan in May and the master planning committee has continued to refine our vision. In October, I will be bringing the Master Plan before the Board of Trustees for their review and approval. In the meantime, I want to highlight the major features of the plan. They include a campus that will become a pedestrian campus — starting with me, we are going to get our exercise by walking around campus! We will be reclaiming a significant amount of green space, again in keeping with the vision of a liberal arts institution. The campus will feature an academic core, with classroom buildings, the library, and other support services in close proximity to one another. The closing of the campus, with green space and the development of a perimeter road, will be a beautiful and wonderful accomplishment. The new fine arts center will become a reality, as will expansion of the Sports Center and other enhancements. And we will build more on-campus housing so that we can continue to reflect the culture of a residential campus.

The Master Planning Committee is meeting today after the University Meeting to continue polishing their work, and I know they still seek your input and comment. While the Master Plan is not a detailed blueprint of every square foot of campus space, it is a vision for the future of our campus, so everyone in this room has a vested interest in it. I am happy to report that the Master Planning Subcommittee of the Implementation Process will be the first committee to complete its work!

Another initiative in the Strategic Plan that I would like to touch upon is the work of the Subcommittee on Diversity, Race, and Justice. “Inclusion” is one of Eastern’s core values, and I believe it is one that all of us share. Based on our values, we assume that we have a welcoming campus. We cannot afford to make that assumption. We have seen what has happened at other campuses — and our sister institution, Central Connecticut State University comes to mind — when the issue of racial insensitivity was raised. I do not want a crisis to trigger our reaction. I want to know before a problem arises at Eastern. That is why the campus culture survey being administered by the Subcommittee will be critical in helping them develop our own vision for a diverse campus. They need to know how our faculty, staff, and students perceive our campus culture. While we are pleased by how many responses we have received to date from faculty and staff, we still need to hear from more of you. Please go online and fill out the survey and encourage all of our students to do so. This is a very important responsibility we all share. Developing a culture of diversity at Eastern depends on having everyone on campus owning and contributing to that culture, both as individuals and within their departmental work unit. In the end, when we ask our students, faculty, and staff the question, “Is this a safe, welcoming campus?” the answer needs to be a heartfelt “YES!” Right now I am not sure.

I would like to mention several other groups who have been working on strategic initiatives. They were asked to serve as the vanguard of our campus community by developing

their proposals ahead of others, and they have come up with sophisticated, data-driven plans, some of which are beginning to be implemented.

For instance, the Student Success Center team is moving rapidly to implement some of its benchmarks. At this point, several distinct programs are underway under the overall umbrella of student success. A proposal for a new advising and support center has been submitted for review and approval. This proposal will move through the process of gaining formal approval from the University Senate — our students deserve the benefits of the committee’s good ideas. The need for a stronger academic advising and academic support program is pressing. We all acknowledge that our graduation rate is not as good as it could be. We believe the Success Center can have immediate impact on our retention and graduation rates, two core measures of whether or not our students are being well served by their liberal arts education. Let us be clear, however, that advisement is in the hands of the faculty as we await the Senate’s response to the research findings and the work of the Senate’s Committee on Advisement.

Their proposal combines professional advisors with faculty advisors to make available a four-stage advising program to all our students, from pre-enrollment orientation to transitioning to college in the first year, to advising students as they explore and choose their major. This initiative seeks to give Eastern students the support they need to persist and graduate in four years by matching their needs with University services and their talents and interests with Eastern’s academic programs.

I am so proud this morning to announce that Eastern has been awarded the Nellie Mae Foundation grant. It is almost \$1 million in funding. The first phase in the grant is to move tutoring and advising services to the first floor of the Library, while also using space there to create a Math Achievement Center and Writing Center and a General Tutoring Center. We are on target to open the Academic Service Center (ASC) next week.

These monies will enable Eastern to provide specialized advising, academic support services, and math and writing support to a cohort of at-risk students. This project was designed to be part of the core work of the Student Success Center. When we began the Strategic Planning process, Carmen Cid and a team of colleagues were encouraged to write a grant that would ultimately fund the Success Center. They wrote a planning grant that was funded last year. This year, they wrote the continuation grant. When the Success Center is fully implemented over time, all students will benefit from an improved advising and academic support system and a proactive intervention program for at-risk students. The goal is to increase the number of students who stay at Eastern and complete their degrees in four years, which is an important indicator of student success.

Another initiative on a fast track is the Center for Community Engagement. The Subcommittee on Community Engagement’s proposal will advance Eastern’s impact on our local community while offering students a more defined, academic-based program in support of their voluntarism. The Implementation Steering Committee has asked the Subcommittee to refine their proposal so that they can explore the relationships with related strategic initiatives. As they continue their work, I did want to mention some of the highlights of what is being proposed. The implementation calls for Eastern becoming “a leader in the renaissance of Willimantic.” The Subcommittee envisions us creating a physical space with appropriate staffing to build upon the service commitment to Willimantic established 20 years ago when Dr. Carter first came to Eastern.

This new model emphasizes service learning, with volunteer activities grounded and supported by academics. A Center for Community Engagement will better identify the critical needs of our local community, and match student interests and capabilities to meeting community needs. It will also more efficiently coordinate activities that have been managed by a number of different departments on campus. For instance, I understand in the past we have had as many as seven separate programs to send Eastern students out into local schools and after-school programs to serve as tutors. Although everyone had good intentions, this lack of organization created challenges of communication and diminished the impact of our work. Coordinating these types of programs can leverage our human resources and have an increased impact in the community. While the Subcommittee's proposal is still being considered, it clearly marks a cultural shift at Eastern, from community service being a requirement of the residential housing contract to a valued component of a complete liberal arts education for which students volunteer.

The third initiative that is moving "full steam ahead" is the full implementation of the Student Center as the hub of student activity. As we move into the Center's second year in its renovated and expanded form, the goal is to expand students' roles in the decision-making processes surrounding use of the Center. Adding evening hours; promoting use by all student clubs as well as community groups; expanding weekend programming for the 50 percent of our students who stay on campus on the weekend; adding commuter-friendly services such as lockers, a post office, and an Automatic Teller Machine; and involving academic departments more in the activities that take place at the center, are all under consideration. When you realize that we had more than 2,250 events (I feel like I attended most of them!) in the Student Center in its first year, the value of the Center and the student organizations it supports becomes even more evident. At the same time, we have work to do — the good news is that students in clubs consistently achieve higher GPAs than our average student. However, only 800 students were in student clubs last year. That's about 30 percent of our resident students, and only 20 percent of our full-time undergraduates. It is a good foundation to build on, and another reason to move forward with our Strategic Plan. We need to have the majority of our students working and contributing to our community as part of their liberal arts education.

Other implementation teams are also moving ahead, again, at different speeds, and starting from different points of reference. With 18 initiatives, more than 60 benchmarks, and more than 180 people involved, I hope that you will agree that much has been done, and progress continues to be made. You can help by staying involved. The proposals I have described, our timelines, and other information are on the updated Strategic Plan website; I encourage everyone to go there and give us their feedback. Remember, we all own Eastern's future.

It is a bright future, one that will allow Eastern to make a significant contribution to our state and nation as Connecticut's public liberal arts university. Our great democracy depends upon the economic and social mobility of the American people, and I think we all agree that a college education can empower people of all classes to gain economic franchise and improved social position.

I was in touch with the power of this idea, and I held onto it this summer. Let me tell you how. Eastern accepts students from all over the state of Connecticut, and of course, that includes the City of Hartford. One student from Hartford, in particular, was finding it difficult to get to Eastern this summer for the SOARS freshman orientation. He had no car, no money for a bus,

and his family didn't really care if he went to college. He is dirt poor. One of our admissions staff, Chris Dorsey, went to the young man's home in Hartford to pick him up so that he could come to orientation. When he saw Chris, he bolted toward the car, and told Mr. Dorsey the following: "Last night, three people were shot 'right there' (pointing nearby). One of the men who was shot came toward me and I saw all the blood gushing out . . . so much blood. Oh my God, I have to get out of here."

Stepping into Chris Dorsey's car and coming to Eastern that day was this young man's first step in the transformation of his life. He had no idea it began today. With your help, he and other students who represent why higher education has a moral responsibility, now have a chance to construct a future for themselves.

That is why we are here. Every day, as you interact with students in the classroom, on the athletic fields, in student activities, and in community initiatives, you make a positive difference in the lives of the students you touch — sometimes a dramatic difference, as was the case this summer with Chris Dorsey.

There is no finer job in this land than yours. We know we alone cannot solve the challenges facing our nation. But we also know that a college education is the key to economic and social freedom. And we know we can make our own contribution to increasing educational access and success in our state and nation. As Connecticut's designated public liberal arts university, we are firmly grounded in our mission. Our focus must be on the residents of our state, helping them prosper as individuals while serving as a resource that can contribute to the economic and social well-being of our state. Let us focus on attracting a broad spectrum of students and then supporting each of them as individuals — one student at a time — so that all of them graduate in four years. If we do that, if we focus on that, the rest will take care of itself. This is why we want to be a University of First Choice — we can help make the world a better place, one student at a time.

Eastern is a coherent body. Your dreams have coalesced into a Strategic Plan, one that is faithful to our mission and focused on our students. The elements of the plan are converging as we move ahead to realize our vision. I know you are ready. I know together, we are up to the challenge. Let's get started. Have a wonderful fall semester! And let us all remember, it's great to be in Connecticut.