

Career Day
Bolton Center School
May 21, 2009

Hello everyone! My name is Elsa Núñez, and I am the president of Eastern Connecticut State University. I am very pleased to be here with you today. Thank you for inviting me to speak at your Career Day event. And thank you to Superintendent Winzler, Principal Grande and the members of the Career Day committee for organizing the presentations and workshops. It is sure to be an interesting and informative day for everyone.

I want to start by asking you a question. Raise your hand if you have ever been asked this question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Almost all of you have, right? People are probably asking you this question all the time — teachers, parents, grandparents, friends, even strangers.

When you were younger and somebody asked you what you wanted to be when you grow up, what answer did you give? A movie star or a baseball player? A firefighter or a police officer? What answer would you give today if I asked you that same question? Would you still say a baseball player, or would you say a teacher or a scientist or a doctor or an engineer?

How many of you are worried because you don't know how to answer the question? When people ask "What do you want to be when you grow up?" they are really asking you what you plan to major in at college, where you want to go to school, what you want to do with your life or maybe even where you want to live. It's like having a crystal ball so you can predict the rest of your life! None of us have that crystal ball, so it is okay for you to tell people, "I don't know yet!"

So here is the most important piece of advice I am going to give you today. Take notes! And repeat it to yourself as often as you need to as you make decisions about choosing what to do in college or what career path you want to pursue. Here it is: Don't panic.

There's a funny fact of life that you should keep in mind as you think about your "career," your major in college, and so on. That fact of life is this: It is likely that almost every successful adult you see today has traveled a winding, twisting path — full of turns — to get to his or her current position in life. It is also very common for children to imagine growing up and working their "dream job"—and actually become an adult who is perfectly content working in a completely different occupation. Ask just about *any* adult, "How did you get where you are today?" You will see how different these paths can be.

For example, I know an Eastern Connecticut State University alumnus — somebody who graduated from Eastern—with a degree in environmental earth sciences. That person went out and got a job as a chemist, where he worked for a while. But he decided that he didn't want to be stuck alone in a lab all day, so he went to graduate school, got a degree in business administration, and took a job in the corporate world. One day he was in a car accident. He was injured and had to visit a chiropractor as part of his recovery. He became very interested in how chiropractors help patients during their healing process. He decided to go back to school again, and now he is a chiropractor with a successful practice and many patients! Today he is working in a career that he never even imagined for himself when he was your age.

Or maybe you might see someone who has a job as a newscaster on TV. If you were to ask him how he got to be a newscaster, he might relate the following story to you: "Well, when

I started college I really wanted to be a geologist, but I ended up having to take a required class in computer programming. I really liked programming, so I ended up changing majors and graduated as a computer scientist. I started out working for IBM and didn't like it, and then began working for a small company. They got this project with a TV station writing software for the news room. One day I got a chance to meet the news anchor for the station and we really hit it off. He liked my voice and suggested I go to broadcasting school. I did that at night for two years. Then one thing led to another and now I am a news anchor myself."

If you talk to 10 successful adults, you might find eight or nine of them with stories like this. It is absolutely normal, and it is common. It is estimated that 75 percent of students change their major at least once during their college careers, and that the average person switches careers three times within their lifetime.

Don't believe me? Let's play a game. It's called "What's My Major?" Can you match the following celebrities with their college majors? Let's start with Kevin Costner. He's an actor, has been in a lot of movies and won two Oscars for his movie "Dances with Wolves." Any guesses? The answer is: E, Marketing and Finance. Did anyone get that one right?

Next one: Natalie Portman. She's an actress; many of you probably know her from the "Star Wars" movies. What do you think she majored in? The answer is: C. She studied psychology at Harvard University.

Okay, now Jay Leno. Do you know who he is? He's a TV talk show host late at night, past your bedtime. What would you guess he would study at college? Would it surprise you to hear that the answer is: G, philosophy?

On to Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of California. Everyone knows him, right? He has changed his career several times during his life. He started out as a body-builder and won several competitions, including Mr. Universe and Mr. Olympia, and he has written several books about the sport. Then he gained worldwide fame as a Hollywood star in roles such as "The Terminator." Six years ago, he was elected governor of California. What do you think he majored in at the University of Wisconsin? The answer is: F, economics.

Here is the next one: Alan Greenspan. Does anyone know who Mr. Greenspan is? He is an economist who was the Chairman of the Federal Reserve of the United States from 1987 to 2006. The chairman of the Federal Reserve is the person who serves as head of the central banking system of the United States and sets the interest rates that determine how much people pay to borrow money for cars and houses. So what do you think he majored in? Wouldn't you probably guess economics? Well, you would be wrong! He majored in music. During his childhood, Mr. Greenspan developed a love of music and became very skilled at playing the clarinet and saxophone. He was a jazz saxophonist for 13 years before he decided to go back to school and earn a degree in finance and commerce.

That leaves Julia Stiles. She's an actress who has starred in a number of movies, most recently in "The Bourne Identity," "The Bourne Supremacy" and "The Bourne Ultimatum" with Matt Damon. If you've been keeping track, you've figured out that what she majored in. She graduated from Columbia University with a degree in English literature.

These aren't the only examples of people who have changed their minds as their interests evolved and changed. Former United States Attorney General Janet Reno was a chemistry major; actor Ashton Kutcher studied biochemical engineering; Lisa Kudrow of Friends was a biology major; Terri Hatcher of Desperate Housewives majored in math and engineering;

and Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones majored in Economics at the London School of Economics!

Do you want to try one more? Can you guess what I majored in at college? I'll give you a few hints that might help you figure it out. I am the president of a state university. I go to a lot of meetings. I do a lot of listening to what people are thinking. I do a lot of planning for the future. I interact with professors, students, employees and members of the community. I give a lot of speeches. Do you think you have it now?

Did anyone guess "English?" Yes, that was my major in college — English and Spanish, actually. Is anyone surprised? Did anyone think I majored in business or economics or something along those lines?

When I was a little girl, I wanted to become a doctor, so you can see how my own sense of what I wanted to be changed as I grew up. I first started my academic career as a faculty member at a college in New Jersey, where I taught English for many years. I was very happy teaching college students. After a while, however, I decided that I wanted new challenges, so I became the Dean of the Faculty at a college in New York. Over the years, I moved up the administrative ladder and took on different jobs, including provost, vice president for academic affairs, and vice chancellor before becoming president of Eastern. In other words, my career has been a work in progress.

So you can see, I certainly didn't wake up one morning at the age of 15 and decide I wanted to be a University President. Becoming an adult is about making smart choices, being patient, accepting help, and taking advantage of opportunities that come your way.

Now let's talk about college! If you are already thinking ahead to college and a possible career, good for you! It is never too early to begin planning your educational goals and laying out an academic path that best complements who you are—and best prepares you for what you want to be. Students who prepare and know what to expect in college—and know that it takes hard work to get there—are more likely to stay in school and be successful. Getting a college education is an investment that will pay you back over your entire lifetime. People with a college education have better job opportunities, earn more money, and develop skills and knowledge that can never be taken away.

So, in choosing your own career and in picking your major, what should you do? The middle school years are a great time to begin exploring. Start by learning about what interests you. Often people will select a career based on an area of interest or even a hobby. Do you like math, science or history? Do you like helping people? What class projects do you look forward to?

Take lots of different courses that challenge you. Pay attention to what subjects you like most and which ones you are good at. Meet with the school guidance counselor and tell him or her that your goal is to attend college. Select classes that will help you prepare for college. Develop good study habits and aim for grades of A or B in all of your classes. Establish solid skills in reading, math, science and foreign languages.

You should also try different extracurricular activities. They will not only help you expand the scope of your exploration, but they will also help you in building up a resume for future college applications. You might discover that you love writing for the school newspaper, and decide to major in journalism. Or perhaps you enjoy solving problems on the math team and are wondering where that might lead in terms of a career path.

Another good idea is to start doing research on different career possibilities so that you can see what is out there. What is your ideal job? There are thousands of jobs that you have never even heard of before, and one of them might be perfect for you. One way to learn about them is to start asking every adult you know, “What do you do for a living?” and then “Do you like it, and why?” Another is to start reading through books and material on the web. Getting knowledge about an occupation helps you get a better understanding of the job’s requirements. For instance, you might enjoy watching “CSI” on television, and think “That would be a neat job!” Further research would show that careers in forensic science often require students to major in chemistry. Knowing that would help you to plan your course schedule accordingly.

Seek out mentors—people who will guide you and help you make decisions about your future. Your parents, your teachers, your guidance counselors — all are very important resources who can support you on your journey of discovery. For me, an important influence was Dr. Morris McGhee, my freshman English professor at Montclair State College in New Jersey. Dr. McGhee was a disabled World War II veteran and had to use a wheelchair. I was from an urban area—I was shy and overwhelmed by the new experience of college. He took an interest in me and made me feel comfortable. Dr. McGhee would read my name when calling out the roll in class: “Elsa Marie Núñez, what a beautiful name.” No one had ever made such a big deal about me! I remember getting my first essay back and the paper was full of red marks, with a note that said, “I want you to visit me in my office.” So I ended up receiving writing instruction in his office once a week. He would help me rewrite my essays and we would talk.

To this day, I will never forget the emotional support he gave me. He saw that from my modest background, I had no idea what I had to do to be successful. And he helped show me the way. I hope all of you are fortunate enough to have a mentor like Dr. McGhee.

Another strategy is to conduct informational interviews. Meet with people whom you admire—start with your family! Ask them what they like and dislike about their work, and why they are happy and satisfied with their careers. Ask these people to refer you to other people who might be interesting interviews as well.

Finally, remember that the world is always changing, and there is no way to tell what kind of jobs today’s teenagers — all of you — will have. A lot of grownups work in industries today that did not even exist when they were in middle school. When I was your age, personal computers didn’t exist. There were no cell phones, no I-pods, no CDs. Technology continues to change our lives. The best way to prepare for the future is to develop skills that will always be in demand: how to think, write, speak, and how to take personal responsibility. As the saying goes, “knowledge is power.”

I will be as interested as any of you to see what directions you will take and to see where the next few years will lead. I am willing to bet that opportunities will emerge and choices will be made that will surprise you. I hope you find a career or a profession or a calling that is rewarding and engaging and makes use of the best of your skills and abilities.

Again, thank you for having me today. I hope I have given you some ideas on how to discover what you want to do for your career. But remember, don’t panic. There’s no rush. Have a great day!