

**Elsa M. Núñez**  
**Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut**  
**Leadership Program Keynote**  
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I would like to thank Kate Caristo-Scalora and the Eastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce for inviting me to speak with you today about education in Connecticut, as part of your leadership training program. Just as you spent time last month learning about health care in eastern Connecticut, I hope I can add to your understanding today of education in our region.

I understand that you have already visited Grasso Technical High School this morning, and this afternoon we are here at Three Rivers Community College.

I should also mention how pleased I am that Dr. Niti Pandey, professor of business administration, was on the panel discussion that just concluded about pathways to secondary education. Dr. Pandey is an expert on employment and human resources and a faculty leader on our campus.

I am happy to add my perspective to what has already been a day full of interesting and information discussions about education and its role in eastern Connecticut.

I want to spend my time with you today talking about two initiatives at Eastern Connecticut State University that I care deeply about. Both programs attempt to increase educational opportunity for students from populations who have historically been underrepresented on college campuses. I hope when my career is over people think of these first when they think of me.

Let me start by quickly sharing three principles that have guided me in my professional journey: I hope they parallel and align with your own principles.

- (1) **I believe leadership is about empowering others to be their best.** Whatever your line of work, you can never do it all on your own. Our role as leaders is to identify who does what best in our organizations and give them the tools to do it. Sometimes that means we need to get out of the way.
- (2) **Being a leader also means championing your organization's values,** for without principles to guide us, we will end up on the wrong path. Values such as teamwork, personal integrity, and a commitment to excellence are principles that help guide us at Eastern.
- (3) Finally, **leadership is about service.** How can we use our own skills and position to help others? Empowerment. Values. Service. Remember those three words. They are among the beliefs that have guided my life and my life's work. They are my own "personal truths." But none of us come by truth on our own. I want to tell you about three people in my life who taught me some of the most important life lessons I have learned.

**My Grandmother Ramona** was a single mother of eight children. She and her family were among 40,000 people who lived in "El Fanguito," the mudflats of San Juan, Puerto Rico. Houses were one-room shacks built on stilts over the water, a tidal basin used by children to swim in but also used by everyone to defecate in.

Disease and sickness hung like a cloud over El Fanguito. Yet Ramona was proud of her own house, a shack she had built by hand from scraps of lumber she could find. My family lived in the mountains of western Puerto Rico, but we would brave the stench of El Fanguito to visit my grandmother, and she would feed all of us despite her modest means.

Dinner at my grandmother's was always a delicious chicken soup, followed by meringue — not a lemon meringue pie, just the egg whites whipped up with sugar.

One day, my grandmother took me below her house where she had a chicken coop—and she wrung the neck of the chicken we were to eat that night—right in front of my eyes! The eggs for the meringue I had understood, but I hadn't realized before that day where the chickens came from for the soup. It was a shocking moment—I think I grew years that day.

Looking back, I feel I was blessed with the lessons Ramona taught me. She taught me the importance of family. She showed me the strength of resilience. And she reminded me how adaptable human beings are—we have an amazing capacity for resourcefulness.

My second role model was my father, **Juan Nunez**. He passed away several years ago but is still with me each day. As I said, I was born in the western mountains of Puerto Rico in a beautiful town called San Sebastian. It is in the coffee growing part of the island.

Neither of my parents had more than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, but like most parents, they worked hard to support their family and they had aspirations for a better life for their children.

This commitment to finding a better life for me and my brothers caused my father to immigrate to America in 1955. He ended up in Newark, New Jersey, and brought the rest of us there to live.

He worked for years in the Fedders air conditioning factory, and pinched pennies so he could pay for me to attend a Catholic girl's high school. I will never forget a Sunday when my mother was complaining to my father about the coat he was wearing to church, and he told her, "I will die in this coat, Carmen, if it means I can send the children to a good school."

My father was a U.S. Army veteran. Three days ago, we honored veterans on our campus and I was reminded of how deeply patriotic my father was. He taught me so much—sacrifice, honor, and the privileges we have as citizens of our great democracy.

Finally let me tell you about my third role model—my Freshman English Professor at Montclair State College, **Dr. Morris McGee**.

Dr. McGee was a Montclair alumnus and football star; a Korean War veteran who had been so severely wounded he was in a wheelchair; a Shakespearean scholar; and the biggest reason I stand before you today. When I entered Montclair as a freshman, I was the only Latina there. On the first day of class, he called the roll and pronounced my name perfectly: "**Elsa Maria Núñez**." I felt special, accepted — maybe I belonged!

But my writing was not sophisticated, and my first essay was full of red ink. From that day forward, on each Saturday, I went to his office and rewrote my papers with his guidance. I got a solid "B" at the end of the course and had confidence I could be a college student.

Dr. McGee not only validated my self-worth, he ingrained in me the role educators play—not just as conveyors of knowledge, but as mentors for young minds and tender hearts.

I hope each of you have people like my grandmother, my father and Dr. Morris McGee in your lives. They truly helped me pursue a path of service.

That is the stage that was set when I arrived at Eastern Connecticut State University in 2006. My grandmother Ramona, my father Juan, my freshman English Professor Morris McGee, and many other people had instilled in me core values, a commitment to empowering people, and a desire to serve others. Within days, I realized the opportunities before me.

During the first week I was in Willimantic, Connecticut, I attended the town's monthly street festival—Third Thursday. I learned that half of the people in Willimantic were Latino, four times the state average, and that many families had come from San Sebastian, my home town in Puerto Rico! I felt that I belonged and had a mission, one that became clearer as time went on. Over the next year, I learned more about Latinos in Connecticut and discovered a pattern of struggle and sacrifice similar to my own.

Most Latinos in Connecticut before and during World War II were Puerto Ricans, drawn by the promise of better wages and the comfort of knowing their U.S. citizenship gave them some equal footing in the States. They worked in munition and furniture factories. They picked vegetables and fruits throughout the state. But the biggest draw for Puerto Ricans was "Tobacco Alley" — more than 200 tobacco farms covering 2,700 square miles between Hartford and Springfield, Massachusetts.

Tens of thousands of workers from Puerto Rico faced 12-14 hour days of hard labor in the fields, seven days a week. They slept in barns, 50-60 men to a barn, usually without sanitation and plumbing. Other workers lived in camps surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards.

I was also shocked to learn of the history of Puerto Ricans in Willimantic. Many were flown from Puerto Rico to work in the Hartford Poultry Company, which processed 3,000 chickens an hour.

Most of the workers were women, who worked long hours during the day using sharp, dangerous scissors, only to sleep two to a bed at night, locked in their rooms.

The other large employer in Willimantic was the American Thread Company, which was Connecticut's largest employer in the 1890s and still Willimantic's largest employer in the 1960s, when it recruited Puerto Ricans to work in its mills. Puerto Ricans weren't paid well, they lived in substandard housing, and the benefits of a college education were largely unavailable.

Back then, before bilingual education programs, students who could not speak English were often put into Special Education classes. When I came to Newark, New Jersey, in the mid-1950s, I also could speak no English. My teacher put me in a corner with a developmentally disabled boy and we drew animals together for the entire year. I learned to speak English by reading the newspaper and eventually escaped from the despair of neglect. Sixty years later, Latino families continue to face these structural challenges.

The National Council of La Raza cites research that shows a Latino child who cannot speak English when they enter first grade is a full year behind his or her classmates — the day they walk into class. By the fifth grade, the gap is two years.

This issue of literacy is only one barrier to educational access and academic performance in the Latino community. I want to share with you data that shows the dramatic difference in the academic performance of poor, urban children — especially Latino and African American children — and the performance of affluent, suburban white children.

The “Achievement Gap” I am about to describe is not something that children exhibit at birth. In fact, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that at age nine months, all children show the same mental acuity and gross motor development. **All children, period.** Regardless of race, the employment level of the mother, whether or not the mother has a parental partner, the mother's income or the mother's educational attainment. **The same mental acuity.** We are truly all born equally!

By age two, the effects of poverty begin to appear, and by age four, children are on divergent paths. Those in affluent, stable households — homes full of books, nutritional food, and intellectual stimulation—are doing well. Children who go to bed hungry each night in dangerous neighborhoods and single-parent households aren't doing so well.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the national clearinghouse of K-12 data in our country. Each state conducts testing at the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12 grade levels in reading, writing, science and mathematics. How does our state of Connecticut do in the testing? **Connecticut has the largest gap in the academic achievement of its K-12 students in the nation!** Simply stated, students of color, living in our cities, caught in the web of generational poverty, perform far worse than their white, suburban, more affluent counterparts.

This was the data I had in hand by fall 2007. I had done my homework, and I was ready to act. Where could I have the biggest impact?

I chose Hartford. The public high school is 2/3rds Latino, 1/3 black and has only a 15% college graduation rate.

I went to Hartford Public High School on my own—my staff didn't know I was going—and I met with two guidance counselors. I asked them, “Do you have students who aren't cutting it but could succeed with the right amount of support?” THEY SAID YES!

The following September, we implemented the Dual College Enrollment program. The program has several pillars that have made it successful. Perhaps most important is that students live on our campus, far from the street violence and instability of their home neighborhoods. We also have a strong system of support services ranging from peer tutoring to professional advising. Students in the program

also benefit from being mentored by their work-study supervisors — the people who see them more each week than any single faculty member.

Over time, upwards of 100 students have gone through program; and their college graduation rate is almost three times that of other Hartford high school students. Graduates of the program have master's degrees in Child Psychology, Social Work; one graduate has two M.A.s and works at Stanford University.

This has been hard, honest work, supported by philanthropists ranging from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to the U.S. Department of Justice. Several years ago, I chronicled the program in my book, "Hanging Out and Hanging On: From the Projects to the Classroom." (HOLD UP COPY)

As a result of this work, we moved the bar when it came to the college completion rates of Latinos on our campus. In 2012, the Education Trust announced that Eastern was "#1 in the United States" on this measure. We had tripled the graduation rate of Hispanic students over a six-year period. This was 10 times the national average and we were first among all public institutions in the country.

Our reputation followed us, and in 2016, Donald Graham, former publisher of the Washington Post, contacted then Governor Dan Malloy. He was seeking a university in Connecticut that would be willing to receive students from other states who were DACA students—undocumented youth who had been brought to America as children. They were "locked out" from attending school in their home states, and Mr. Graham's foundation was willing to pay for their education.

In 2016 Eastern became one of only two pilot schools in the country to enroll Mr. Graham's "Opportunity Scholars." Today, we have 205 "Dreamers" from 17 states. They have an average GPA of 3.4 and a 96% retention rate, a figure that rivals Harvard and Yale. They are campus leaders; community servants; and future doctors, scientists, and educators.

Two days ago, the Supreme Court heard arguments regarding the future of DACA and the future of our 205 students. I am struck and humbled by the importance and the impact of what we are doing at Eastern!

These two examples of empowerment, values, and service—the Dual College Program and our DACA initiative — are not my achievements alone. They are shared across our campus. Together we serve these students, we instill in them the values we espouse, and we encourage them to go out into the world and serve others themselves. Like you, they are tomorrow's leaders.

And so I applaud each of you for taking time to participate in this leadership development program. I am sure you are already recognizing the value to you personally and professionally. The skills you are learning will surely be of benefit to you and your employer in your work setting. And the Eastern Connecticut Chamber of Commerce has faith that this group of leaders is going to add strength and numbers to the volunteer leaders who sit on non-profit boards and perform community service throughout our region.

Your work—this work—has always been needed in our communities. Today we are at another crossroad in our nation's history. Horace Mann, one of the founders of the U.S. public education system almost 200 years ago, called education the "great equalizer of the conditions of men." He was focused on developing what is now our public K-12 system, but I am sure he would agree today that higher education is critical to the success of most Americans and our nation as a whole.

The Center for Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University estimates that two-thirds of the jobs of the future will require at least a two-year, if not a four-year college degree. How are we doing? Thirty years ago, the United States was first in the world in the percentage of adults 25 years of age and up with a college education. Today we are 12<sup>th</sup> — Norway, Japan, Canada, Korea and other nations have passed us.

But the data gets even more sobering. The sectors of our population that are growing the fastest—especially Latinos—lag behind the white majority in terms of college completion.

And the trends cry out for immediate action; by next year, whites under the age of 18 will be in the minority. In 10 years, whites ages 18-29 will be in the minority. By 2050, ethnic minorities will make up the majority of the overall population.

If we do not do a better job of serving minority students and supporting them in completing college degrees, our economy will not be competitive in the global marketplace. In addition, as societies experience increasingly gaps in income equity, they begin to unravel.

I don't want to end my remarks with gloom. The fact is, we have great opportunities. With leaders like you, our communities, state and nation can solve the problems before us. But I ask that each of you, whether you are an educator or not, as a leader in your community, please advocate for an educated America. Each citizen of our great nation deserves the economic and social mobility that an education brings—I am living proof of the transformational power of an education. An educated populace means less public funding is needed to create a safety net for those without means.

An educated workforce will continue to be the engine of economic strength in this country. And finally, only an educated citizenry can be fully engaged in the work of self-governance that is the hallmark of the greatest democracy our planet has ever known.

I am in the golden years of my career. You are much earlier in yours. Even so, you also can make a conscious choice about what you will be remembered for. Don't wait to begin giving back. I would tell you that when we put service to others first, our careers will have a way of taking care of themselves. So let me close by asking you to reflect on three questions:

1. What are the values and principles you live by?
2. Who are the role models who influenced you the most?
3. What acts of service do you want to be remembered for? Perhaps they are in your future...now is time to start dreaming!

Thank you for your commitment to growing your leadership skills to benefit your community. And thank you for letting me share my experiences with you today!