

Keynote Address
Annual Scholarship Banquet
Black Engagement Council/Electric Boat
June 10, 2022 (Virtual)

I am honored to be with you tonight for this virtual celebration of student excellence and the support being provided to students in the New London area by Electric Boat and the Black Engagement Council.

While I would love to see everyone in person, I am very pleased to be with you virtually for this 27th Annual BEC Scholarship Banquet. I want to start by acknowledging the late Lewis Cornelius, who launched the BEC 31 years ago to recruit Black engineers to Electric Boat. Shortly afterwards, he and his colleagues at Electric Boat started this scholarship program. Mr. Cornelius passed away a year ago, and I know he is missed by the Electric Boat and local New London/Groton communities.

I want to thank Wilmer Lambert, president of the Black Engagement Council, Electric Boat President Kevin Graney, and their colleagues for inviting me to be tonight's keynote speaker. I am also grateful to Vice President Andrew Bond for that kind introduction.

I want to congratulate this year's BEC scholarship recipients — Mariah Riley of East Lyme High School and Claire Inyang of Ledyard High School. Their talent and commitment to making this a better world truly inspires me.

It is wonderful to see the Electric Boat community supporting local students. I note that past BEC scholarship recipients are pursuing careers in computer science, healthcare, accounting, the aerospace industry and more — this community is not only supporting local students, you are preparing the leaders needed in our 21st Century economy.

The theme of tonight's banquet is "Community Engagement" — how communities support their members and how their members contribute to the community. Each of us has a neighborhood, a community of neighborhoods. While some people in today's mobile society have moved from one neighborhood to another, most people grow up among familiar faces — people who look like them and the other members of their family.

The word "community" conjures up many images in my mind. A high school is a community, and I know that Mariah and Claire are active in their own high schools. A workplace is a community, and clearly the people of Electric Boat are not only committed to being active in their workplace but also in New London County.

Eastern Connecticut State University is also a community. I will be speaking in detail of how our campus community supports our students, especially students of color and first-generation students. But first, I want to talk about the communities I have come from.

I grew up in two different communities and each has impacted my life in very distinctive ways. My values were forged from my early experiences and are the foundation of how I lead Eastern Connecticut State University today.

I was born in San Sebastián, a town in the western hills of Puerto Rico. My parents were part of the farming community there. We led a humble, rural life, one full of family and friends.

One memory that I have carried throughout my life were our visits to my maternal grandmother, Ramona, in the capital of San Juan, two hours east of San Sebastián. Ramona had

moved to the capital city because jobs were so scarce in the rural regions. She lived in “El Fanguito,” the poorest slum in San Juan. It means “Little Mudhole” in Spanish.

Each family that lived there had built their shacks out of scrap wood and other leftover materials. The entire community of 7,000 families—about 40,000 people—lived on stilts over the tidal backwaters. There was no running water, no electricity, no toilets. The water below the huts was full of human waste and the source of many diseases.

I was always happy to see my grandmother, but getting to her home across the precarious planks that connected all the shacks was an ordeal for me as a young child. Once we got there, Ramona would feed us delicious chicken soup and meringue from the chicken eggs. It was magical to a young child!

Looking back now, I realize my grandmother had a tough life, struggling each day for survival. But she taught me so much! How to be resourceful, how to be resilient, and to always keep your family at the center of your life. Those lessons inform my professional and personal life to this day, and I hope everyone listening has someone like Ramona in their life to inspire them. For me, those lessons also mean I will always look at each student as an individual who deserves respect and has untapped potential to be nurtured and developed.

When I was 8 years old, my father moved us to Newark, New Jersey, to build a better life. We were some of the first Puerto Ricans in Newark, and we felt isolated and alone for many years.

My father and mother worked hard in an air conditioning factory to support my brothers and me, and their sacrifices enabled me to attend the best all-girls Catholic School in that part of New Jersey. I worked hard at school, and when I was a senior, I was accepted to Montclair State College and Rutgers in New Jersey, as well as prestigious Middlebury College in Vermont.

I remember the day I was accepted into Middlebury. Mother Superior, the head of our high school, called me into her office. Instead of congratulating me, she asked me “Who does your father know?” She assumed that a poor Puerto Rican girl couldn’t have been accepted to college on merit; we must have known someone and worked our connections. We knew no one! That day was another reminder of how prejudice and ignorance have held back so many African American and Latino young people in this country.

I eventually went to college at Montclair State, and with the support of faculty and friends, I graduated and later earned my master’s degree and my doctorate. Like our scholarship recipients today, I received support from many sources — my family, faculty mentors, fellowships, scholarships, and more. I am living proof of what happens when communities support individual students.

Again, I applaud the Black Engagement Council at Electric Boat for supporting students to achieve their dreams. There is nothing more liberating than a college education, nor a greater tool for equity and social justice.

I would like to speak now about how our campus community at Eastern supports students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation students. When I arrived at Eastern in 2006, I was committed to paying it forward — to use my own experiences to provide greater access to students from underrepresented sectors of our population.

I consider educational access to be a moral imperative if we are to achieve economic equity and social mobility for people of color. In addition, our social fabric and economic

prosperity as a nation depends on providing a college education to more people from communities who have historically been disenfranchised. The percentage of minorities in the workforce grows, even as college attendance and completion rates of minority students still lag behind their White counterparts.

Yes, we need well-trained tradespeople — plumbers, electricians . . . and service professionals — chefs, truck drivers. . . people who don't need a college degree. Yet experts tell us two-thirds of new jobs will require a two- or four-year degree. Job openings across the skills spectrum are at an all-time high. Right now, I am told there are more than 60 high-tech manufacturing jobs open currently at Electric Boat. The need for technology skills and the competencies taught at college have never been more important.

Both of today's scholarship recipients are young women. The data is clear that women are still not equitably represented in STEM careers — Science, Technology, Engineering and Math — the types of jobs you find at Electric Boat. I am proud that the majority of STEM graduates at Eastern are women — majoring in Math, Computer Science, Biology, Health Sciences, and Environmental Earth Science. We encourage women at Eastern to aspire and reach high, and we support them to do so. Many of them are women of color. I could not be prouder of those young women!

We have worked hard at Eastern to support women **and men** of color, as we seek to serve students from all backgrounds. We have reached out not only to underrepresented communities in the process, we have also inspired donors and other organizations to join us. Let me briefly share two examples with you and how one Eastern success story helped launch the other.

A year after I arrived at Eastern in 2006, I met with two guidance counselors at Hartford Public High School, where two-thirds of the students are Latino and one-third are African American. I asked them if they had students who couldn't meet college entrance standards, but had grit and talent nonetheless. They said yes, and in 2008, we enrolled 15 students in what we called the Dual College Enrollment program.

They took three classes at our local community college in their first semester, but lived on our campus like other Eastern students. They had campus jobs, mentors, access to support services, and financial support from sources ranging from the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving to the U.S. Department of Justice and the Walmart Foundation. They became full-time Eastern students in their second semester.

Over time, the graduation and retention rates of our minority students improved to the point where, in 2012, a national survey found that Eastern had had the largest improvement of our Latino graduation rate of any public institution in the country. African American students were enjoying similar success. Today, 10 years later, our African American students have a better retention rate—79% between freshman and sophomore year—than our overall student population, which is 78%.

I am proud of our African American and Latino students. I am proud of the faculty and staff who support them. And I believe one of my roles, in addition to providing leadership on our campus, is to advocate for our students and programs like the Dual Enrollment program. Over the past 15 years, I have traveled to Chicago, to Washington, DC, to San Francisco and other places, to encourage other educators to implement similar programs. I have also had opportunities to ask government agencies, donors, and other groups to support students from

underrepresented communities. Of course, I bring this message to Connecticut audiences as well, including events like today's scholarship banquet.

This advocacy has helped Eastern assist even more students. In 2016, I was approached by Donald Graham, former publisher of the Washington Post. He asked Eastern to be one of two schools to pilot his Opportunity Scholars program. This program provides a full scholarship to students in 20 "locked out" states, places like North Carolina, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Idaho — where undocumented students can't enroll at public universities in their home states.

98% of the first class of Opportunity Scholars at Eastern graduated in four years — that's the kind of success you see at Harvard and Yale! Six years later, Eastern has the largest number of Opportunity Scholars in the country — little Eastern!, and one of our Opportunity Scholars starts at Harvard Medical School this fall.

I am proud of this partnership with TheDream.US and equally proud of our national reputation. But we are here first and foremost to serve Connecticut students, and we love building relationships with Connecticut communities. Last month, Eastern entered into an agreement with the Hispanic Alliance of Southeastern Connecticut to provide additional scholarship support to New London students attending Eastern. We have similar agreements with the Hartford Promise and the New Haven Promise, which are committed to scholarship support in those two major Connecticut communities. What the Black Engagement Council is doing in the New London area is dear to my heart, and parallels what we are trying to accomplish at Eastern. We would love to see some of your scholarship recipients come to Eastern!

One other thing. The Black Engagement Council asked students applying for this scholarship to explain how individuals can support their community. It has been interesting to see how our minority students at Eastern — the students in our Dual Enrollment program and our Dream.US program especially — give back to our local Willimantic community. They are outstanding student leaders, working with children in after-school programs, assisting with senior citizens, volunteering at our soup kitchen and local addiction services.

These students tell me that they volunteer because (1) they want to give back in recognition of the support they have received, and (2) because our local community looks like their own neighborhoods. It's all about sticking together, respecting each other for our differences and celebrating what we hold in common, and working together to make this world a better place. Thank you for being part of that work!

I want to close my remarks today with a short video about our Dual Enrollment program. I think it is great testimony for why we do what we do, and the difference we can make in students' lives.