

**“Why Does Diversity Matter on our Campuses?”
ELSA NUNEZ REMARKS
NEBHE ANNUAL MEETING
SEPTEMBER 25, 2020**

I would like to thank Michael Thomas and Candace Williams for inviting me to speak with you.

Today I was asked to speak about faculty and staff diversity on my campus and elsewhere. How diverse are our faculty and staff? Have we made progress? What challenges remain? And what role can a diverse faculty play in advancing equity and social mobility on our campuses? Let me put all these questions into a national context.

I think we all would agree that our campuses should represent the population we serve — our students. The fact is, while students of color make up 55-60% of higher education enrollment in our nation, minority faculty represent only about 20-25% of the total number of college faculty.

The numbers are worse for Latinos — they make up 20-25% of our student population nationally but only 5% of faculty. Blacks make up 14% of the student population but only 6% of the faculty.

By 2050, Whites will be in the minority. As the nation’s demographics continue to shift, we will need to support more students of color in entering our gates and graduating on time at Commencement. We cannot do that if we don’t increase the diversity of our faculty and staff ranks.

Sadly, we have made little progress in the past 20 years. From 1997 until now, the percentage of students of color on college campuses has grown from 28% to 45%. The faculty percentage has grown from 14% to 24%. If you look at these two trend lines against each other, we are no closer to having the number of minority faculty reflect the student body on our campuses.

As a rough estimate, we need to double the representation of Latino and Black professors in the next 30 years to match the changing demographics of our nation.

How is Eastern Connecticut State University—my own campus — doing against that backdrop? I am proud to tell you that in recent years, Eastern has had the highest percentage of minority faculty of any college or university in Connecticut.

All told, 30.4% of our faculty are ethnic minorities, and 28% of our staff are ethnic minorities. These figures are roughly equivalent to our student population, which is 31% minority. Far better than what I have just shared with you as the national average.

This is not something we achieved overnight. It is the product of hard work by many people.

Our entire campus understands that you cannot be a global citizen if you don’t know what the rest of the world looks like, what other people eat, how other cultures dress, or what other societies think of our own.

I am proud to tell you that we are committed to hiring the best person for each open position on our campus — qualifications, work experience, and how someone will fit into our campus culture are the key measures.

But our hiring process is also committed to building as large and diverse a pool of candidates as we can, so that we can increasingly hire qualified candidates of color. We work very hard at that, and the numbers demonstrate that we have been on the right track.

I want to step back from Eastern for a second to speak about all of higher education in the state of Connecticut.

Eastern belongs to the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System, and one of the system's strategic goals is equity. I know other public and private institutions in Connecticut are equally committed to increasing the diversity of their faculty and staff.

About 35% of all undergraduates in Connecticut are minorities—in our system, that figure is slightly higher at 37%. And while less than 20% of the faculty are minorities at some colleges in Connecticut, others—UConn, Yale, Wesleyan — are also close, like Eastern, to achieving faculty numbers that are equivalent to their student populations. It takes time and effort to move the numbers, but I know the commitment to inclusion, equity, and diversity can be found across our state.

Why does diversity matter on our campuses? We know that students of color feel better about seeing a familiar face — someone who looks like them — at the front of a classroom. How important is it to see a Black or Brown face at the podium?

Community college data shows that the academic performance of students of color dramatically improves when they are taught by faculty of color. I suspect four-year institutions can show similar results. That shouldn't be surprising — we all feel protected, affirmed, and inspired by role models whom we can relate to.

White students also benefit from having faculty of color. Seeing a person of color as an authority figure, as an academic and professional expert, broadens a student's world view and gives them personal experience of the positive impact of living in a multicultural society.

Faculty of color are also research mentors, club advisors, and sponsors for multicultural activities and events on campus. And at a time when social injustice is again a major focus of campus dialog, student leaders, especially those of color, have a higher level of trust in the advice and council of faculty of color.

Where do we go from here?

The challenges that exist throughout our society continue to be reflected on our campuses.

Last year women were earning 79 cents for every dollar earned by a man doing the same work. In higher education, **women of color earn only 67 cents on the dollar.**

We know that **college attendance** and **graduation rates** reflect this inequity, and women of color are underrepresented even more in the numbers of people getting STEM degrees. No wonder that, while women represent 24 percent of STEM workers, Latinas have only 2 percent of those jobs.

What can we do? Institutions can start by analyzing the data. What pay inequities exist between men and women on your campus? Are there differences based on major? Based on ethnic background? How does your campus data compare to other institutions?

Secondly, we need to strengthen and expand career paths for men and women of color, paying particular attention to the status of women on our campuses. That includes strengthening and expanding professional development programs that help new faculty move

up the faculty ranks. That means providing clear objectives and support mechanisms for faculty research, publishing, and other opportunities to grow professionally.

We also need to create the same pathways to support faculty in advancing to administrative positions.

The same strategies need to be employed for staff positions. We cannot be effective change agents in our communities or provide social mobility to underrepresented populations if the only people of color students see are on the maintenance staff or serving food in the cafeteria. Staff professional development must espouse the same diversity values and strategies as faculty development.

But our work goes beyond the hiring process—it begins with increasing educational access and success for students of color. **And we have a lot of work to do.** While 40% of white women have a two- or four-year degree by age 29, only 20% of Latino or Black women do. Only 40% of black students and 55% of Hispanic students complete their degrees in six years, compared to 64% of white students. We also need to change the percentages when it comes to STEM majors.

Black women represent 7% of the total population, but only 4% of biology majors, 2.6% of computer sciences majors, 2.3% of math majors, and 1% of engineering majors. Students of color are also more likely to transfer out of those majors than white students.

We need to increase the number of students of color on our campuses, supporting them to become educators, scientists, technologists, mathematicians, and engineers. We need to ensure that young women are given the support they need to overcome the biases they have experienced over the years and still experience.

In addition to increasing the numbers of minority faculty and staff, to improve student retention our institutions must ensure that they have active student life programs that support diversity — student clubs that represent and celebrate other cultures. Women's Centers, Pride Centers, and Cultural Centers.

Student life programming — speakers, discussion groups, student panels — should also include discussions of the tough issues that can only be resolved when our students understand the problems and have opportunities to enact change.

At Eastern this semester, we are having town halls, documentary films, and other programming around such difficult issues as domestic violence and systemic racism. This fall we have introduced a new program of inclusivity training in our dormitories. We want our students to see progress as a combination of informed discussion and positive action — on our campus and in the greater community.

Progress to diversify our faculty ranks begins with our values. It must be part of our strategic planning, with resources allocated to the task. It is hard work, sustained over time. And it is important work.

Improving the diversity of our campus workforce is critical to the success of our institutions into the future. As our campuses enroll more students of color, we must redouble our commitment to having campus communities that reflect the world around us.

If we do this, we can instill in our students the values and cultural perspectives that will allow them to lead lives as engaged citizens of a global community, one that desperately needs their leadership. Thank you for listening today, and best wishes on enhancing an inclusive community on your own campuses.