

**Harvard University Graduate School of Education**  
**Women in Leadership**  
**November 10, 2021**  
**“Five Paths to Leadership”**

I want to share **five major lessons** I have learned during my more than 50 years in higher education. What I hope you see as I describe each lesson is this — **leadership is not about theories**. It’s not about typology or schemas or grand themes and brilliant analysis. In the end, leadership is about encouraging people to **do** their best, to **be** their best—for the good of all. That means being **courageous** in the face of **difficulty**, being **vulnerable** in the face of **adversity**, and **trusting yourself and others** in the face of **doubt**.

**LESSON ONE: “Share Authority”**

**Encourage and facilitate group decision-making.** When you can put individuals in situations where they can all contribute expertise in making a group decision, feeling comfortable to offer opinions, information, and knowledge while respecting/ acknowledging the opinions, information, and knowledge of others — that’s when you have high performing teams. This mutually respectful, fluid dynamic is built on trust and interpersonal relationships. Small groups create this atmosphere, which can be carried upward and outward to the larger organization.

The result is a broad-based, institution-wide level of trust, respect, engagement, and ownership. The key is to value both individual and group decisions. Find opportunities to do both — it empowers individuals and promotes trust among teams.

In the same way, don’t ask for input if you can’t find ways to demonstrate that you are using it. (Sometimes you can’t, and you need to acknowledge those moments and try to balance them with situations where you can empower teams to make independent decisions.)

**Example:** In 2006 I arrived at Eastern, with decades spent as a faculty member and administrator on college campuses and in two different systems—one being the CUNY system in New York and the other being the Maine System. Nonetheless, I faced a new job and people I didn’t know. I needed to adjust to a new campus, new people, and new stakeholders. Eastern was at end of the existing planning cycle so we had an opportunity to work together to establish common goals and direction. To start with, I needed to build trust and relationships, so the first year I was at Eastern, I met with faculty, students, and town leaders.

I needed a faculty member to co-chair our Strategic Planning Committee and was able to create a trusting relationship with the head of the faculty senate—a powerful man and someone I was warned not to work with. Building trust with this professor not only provided a framework for our own relationship, it told the campus I could be trusted.

Then it was time to bring the campus together and empower people to work in teams. Sharing power sounds daunting to some, but none of us can do all the work alone, and the intellectual power, dedication and capacity to get things done on our campuses is something all of us—you and I—should be taking advantage of. At Eastern, we brought together 300 members of the campus to plan our future. We had four major committees, and each committee had administrator and faculty co-chair. One committee developed an updated Mission Statement and Vision Statement, as well as a set of core values.

I remember the day the faculty co-chair of that committee told me, “Elsa, we can be an elite institution without being elitist.” It was a light-bulb moment and reaffirmed my faith that the faculty had the capacity to lead—as individuals and as a group.

Another committee researched forces impacting Eastern and brought new data and perspectives to the fore, information the other committees used to formulate their plans. A third committee looked at improving retention rates while the fourth looked at how academic departments could become exemplary and achieve national status.

Through this collaborative, group process, we developed a living Strategic Plan that drives budgets and resource allocations. We assess our progress frequently. In 2013, we refined our first five-year plan; we have just ended our second, and are on the path to updating the Strategic Plan for our third five-year cycle.

The commitment we have developed is a testament to a culture of trust. When you have a culture of trust, a clear direction shared across your campus, alignment between goals and resources, and a shared commitment to a shared vision and common goals, you expand your capacity to make decisions in teams.

To promote group decision-making, we broke down horizontal boundaries between departments, broke down vertical boundaries so everyone has an equal say, worked with stakeholders across the University, and continue to use data to inform our decisions.

Two implementation teams that came out of our Strategic Plan that demonstrate the power of group decision-making were our Exemplary Program Review Committee and the Advising Committee. The Exemplary Academic Programs Review Committee was a cross-functional faculty/staff team that included no administrators.

The group created a voluntary evaluation program for academic departments that uses a sophisticated, criteria-based rubric to identify excellent academic programs to drive budget allocations, faculty lines, research funds and equipment. No one person could have done this, and I suspect if administrators had tried, the faculty would not have accepted the results.

The group that dealt with advising was equally ground-breaking. We knew from NSSE data that we had a problem with academic advising. We used Nellie Mae Foundation funding to hire more professional advising staff, and a team of faculty and staff developed a four-stage advising model, that created Targeted Advising Cohorts (TACs). One of our math faculty created a multivariate, regression analysis model to predict the success of freshmen.

Students are placed in one of the four “TACs” and provided interventions ranging from tutoring and advising for the most at-risk quartile to simply monitoring the progress of high performing students.

When I began my journey at Eastern in 2006, I knew that trusting the campus community and empowering the faculty and staff to work together to come up with innovative solutions was the right thing to do. To witness how they have taken that trust and empowerment and run with it has been a true awakening and a joy to behold!

**Here is another example of how I learned to empower others; this is about recognizing and endorsing people with talents you do not have.** None of us like a know-it-all. I am sure you can think of someone in your professional past or present — someone in a position of authority — who literally suck the air out of the room. No matter what the topic or issue, they have the answer. They might even ask you and your colleagues for input and advice.

But whatever you say isn’t good enough—they ultimately have the best approach. At least, it is the approach that is used.

All of us know better, however. Each of you has worked in teams in which, despite the charge given, the limitations of your authority, or the organizational expectations, the team was expected to work together to find a solution. In those instances, you learn who does what best, and hopefully those people are aligned with their strengths and the work gets done.

This is true when we work in teams . . . and it is also true when we serve in leadership roles as individuals. As a president, I can look across my entire organization to find alignments between challenges we face and individuals or teams with the talents needed to resolve them.

You don't have to be a president to find those opportunities. Let me give you an example of how I teamed up with someone to accomplish a difficult assignment that I knew I did not have the skills to accomplish.

**Example:** I was charged with coming up with a risk assessment for the state university system in Maine. I didn't have that skill and I knew it. I was at a presentation made by a man who clearly could think in the abstract—he had that gift. I asked his boss to let him work with me, and he came up with a brilliant multi-dimensional risk assessment model. It was a work of art. It helped me meet my charge, and I made sure to thank him and acknowledge him when it was done. Through that process, it also gave his career a boost. Everyone benefitted because I found someone to do something I knew I could not do.

None of us can do it all. But if we can find people who complement us, we can be successful as a team.

## **LESSON TWO: It's about personal relationships. People want to know you are the same as them—a human being. Let me share two examples from my own past.**

**People problems don't go away without looking them in the eye.** I was an English professor at Ramapo College in New Jersey. Another professor in the department was essentially being mean-spirited to me, and I did not know why. I went to see him in his office one day—unannounced or scheduled—and sat down. I said in the plainest yet politest of terms, “Ray, why don't you like me? You have said things and done things that make me feel like I am under attack. Why is this?” The other professor apologized, and it never happened again. I gave him the opportunity to be a human being to me — when given the chance to make things right, most people do that!

**Mentor someone.** One of my pleasures on a small campus is being able to get to know students on a personal basis. I have student workers in my office every semester, and some of them have asked me to be their personal mentor. It has been an honor and is my small way to give back.

You see, I would not be here today if it wasn't for my own special mentor in college. I am referring to my freshman English professor at Montclair State College in New Jersey more than 50 years ago. When I enrolled in college, I spoke English well, I read well, but my writing was not at the college level.

Dr. Morris McGee was a Montclair alumnus and a football star while in college. When I met him in fall 1966, he was a Korean War veteran and bound to a wheelchair due to wounds he had suffered in the war. He was also a Shakespearean scholar and a wonderful professor.

I will never forget our first day of English class. I was the only Latina in the room—the only one on campus! — and I was sure that I didn't belong.

That first day of class, Dr. McGee recognized my fears in an instant. He called the roll—John Miller, Mary Beck, Paul Evans. When he came to my name, he said, “Elsa Maria Núñez,” with perfect enunciation and flair.

It sounded beautiful, perhaps the first time someone had bothered to say my name in that way. I felt special that day. And then our first essay was graded. My paper was full of red ink—a sea of red! And there was a note from Dr. McGee. I was to stop by to see him in his office the following Saturday.

Each Saturday for the rest of the term, I would sit in his office reworking my essays while he read or graded other papers. I would stop, he would give me feedback, and I would continue, reworking my papers until the red ink no longer dripped from them.

By the end of the semester, I had a solid B, and the confidence that I could make it in college. I will never forget Dr. Morris McGee—he is the reason I am here before you today.

I suspect each of you has a mentor you can think of. Please think of someone in your own life that you can talk about during our Q and A session following my remarks. And think about the opportunities you have to mentor a student or a faculty colleague.

### **LESSON THREE: Never compromise your institution's values or your own principles.**

Sometimes you can find a solution to someone's problem/issue without bending the rules or compromising your values. When you do that, people will respect you two-fold.

We had a situation at Eastern where one of our best teaching faculty members did not make full professor. She is a wonderful person, an effective classroom instructor, and does great work in the community.

But she had not done much to publish anything. She was distraught and shared her displeasure with me in a meeting also attended by her department chair. That person was also unhappy with me.

I couldn't compromise our promotion and tenure process. What did I do? First of all, I listened. And I sympathized. I made it clear I valued the professor and understood her pain.

And then I said, "You need to work with someone on the faculty who is a seasoned writer and has published articles. Have that person coach you. Get some of your work published. And then go back after a promotion."

The department chair endorsed my recommendation. The professor found a coach, worked hard, and had some of her work published in juried journals. A year later, she reapplied for promotion and got it.

Here are the lessons here. **Reach out and touch people** on a human level. That reduces the emotional tone so they can think clearly. **Help them find a solution. Support it.** But continue to **respect your values** and principles. Without them, we have nothing. And if you cave once, you might as well close up shop.

### **LESSON FOUR: Be thankful for what you receive.** Humility and grace are powerful medicines.

The reason truths become clichés is not because they are hollow. It is because they ring so true that everyone repeats them until they lose the story behind them and they become like wallpaper.

We wear the truth out sometimes, but it remains true nonetheless. For instance, we say that each of us finds success through the support of others — no one achieves greatness on their own.

That is a fundamental truth, yet it sounds flat when I say it. Perhaps one reason is because so many people in public life depend on the appearance of invincibility to maintain their stature.

And it is difficult to be in public life today without being subject to ridicule through social media and other means—on a 24/7 basis. Against this backdrop, staying humble and

acknowledging the people who support us can be a salve, an antidote to the negativity that we see in our society.

**Example:** One day I was in a positive mood and recalled a former colleague who I had not reached out to for years. His name was Barry Bressler. I called him up and he said, “I thought you wanted another letter of recommendation.”

I explained that no, I was just calling to thank him for his support when we were colleagues. He was astounded . . . and it made his day. I want each of you—right now—to think of someone in your past who helped you in a direct or indirect way, someone you never had a chance to thank. I want you to be ready to do just that as soon as you can. You will make two people very happy that day.

### **LESSON FIVE: When you do the right things, it can pay off later in ways you don’t see initially.**

**EXAMPLE:** At Eastern, we have worked diligently on improving access and success for marginalized populations—first-generation students, low-income students, minority students.

We also were fortunate early in my presidency to be awarded some Department of Labor and Department of Education grants and private foundation funds to support retention efforts. We consolidated all academic support into our Academic Services Center, created a data-based system of advising cohorts, and launched an early warning system for at-risk students.

With these supports, we launched a program with Hartford Public High School in Hartford’s inner city in 2008. It has included remedial instruction at our local community college, on-campus housing, on-campus employment, peer and faculty mentors, intensive advising, tutoring, and other supports.

Additional support has come from local foundations, the U.S. Department of Justice and the WalMart Foundation, to name just a few benefactors.

Over the years, more than 100 students from Hartford Public High School have enrolled in the program. Some graduates have earned master’s degrees in child psychology, social work and other disciplines. One graduate has two master’s degrees and works at Stanford.

At the same time, we have worked hard to recruit minority faculty members. All of this led to the following unexpected results:

- In 2012, The Public Trust determined Eastern had the largest increase in Hispanic graduation rates among all public institutions surveyed in the United States. We tripled our graduation rate for Latino students from 20% to 58% over the six-year period surveyed, a rate of improvement that was ten-fold that of other public institutions in the study.
- The Chronicle of Higher Education determined we had the highest percentage of minority faculty among all colleges and universities in Connecticut, including Yale, Wesleyan, UCONN—everyone!
- This past fall, our overall freshman-sophomore retention rate was over 80% for the first time; it was exactly at 80%. Our Latino retention rate was 83%, and our African American retention rate was 86%!
- More than 40% of our students continue to be first-generation students, a reflection of our commitment to access and our mission as a public institution.
- Even so, the high school GPAs and SAT scores of entering freshmen continue to increase. We have maintained academic excellence and access at the same time.

In 2016, Donald Graham, former publisher of the Washington Post, started a foundation to support the college dreams of undocumented students. It is called TheDream.US. He was seeking institutions willing and prepared to pilot his program. Our governor and state system president shared the data I have just cited with Mr. Graham, and he was impressed with our success.

As a result, in fall 2016 Eastern Connecticut State University was one of two institutions in the nation to enroll the first cohort of “Opportunity Scholars” funded by TheDream.US. This fall we will have almost 200 undocumented students supported by Mr. Graham’s foundation—about 160 “Opportunity Scholars” from 17 other states ranging from Georgia to Iowa, Louisiana and Wisconsin, as well as more than 30 “National Scholars” from Connecticut.

Opportunity Scholars receive scholarships to fully pay for their tuition, fees, room and board. As Connecticut residents, “National Scholars” get their tuition and fees paid for by TheDream.US. No public funds are being used to support these students, and no Connecticut students are being denied admission because of the Opportunity Scholars attending Eastern from other states.

That’s \$4 million in revenue, and 200 of some of the best students you will find. So our good work over the past decade and a half has generated unexpected dividends. It was not without institutional courage.

We realized when we started the relationship with Mr. Graham’s organization that we would be subject to criticism from anti-immigration forces. We could have played it safe, but it was a moment when I felt the University and I had to express our values and exercise moral courage.

Imagine what America would be like if ships carrying European immigrants in the late 1800s had been barred from entering New York City harbor! In such a world, we might not see the Statue of Liberty declaring today, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses . . . yearning to breathe free.”

We chose to be “all in,” and we now have 200 undocumented students “living the dream” because of Mr. Graham’s generosity, our track record, and our determination to do the right thing.

I am so proud of our Dreamers! The average GPA of our Opportunity and National Scholars is 3.4; some of them are 4.0 students. Their overall retention rate of 96 percent rivals that of Harvard, Princeton and other nationally renowned institutions. Opportunity Scholars are also campus leaders — as members of the Honors Program, as resident assistants, as club officers and as senators on the Student Government Association.

They volunteer hundreds of hours a week to community organizations. They have established their own student club — Freedom at Eastern.

They are also working with the statewide organization “Connecticut Students for a Dream” to advocate for permanent legal status with our state legislators. At the same time, our campus has been strengthened and enriched by the presence of these undocumented students, adding to the rich cultural diversity already found at Eastern.

When I speak to TheDream.US scholarship recipients, and I make an effort to seek them out individually whenever possible, I am struck by their gratitude and their determination to succeed. These young people, like the native-born citizens they sit next to in class, are our nation’s future leaders, doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers and business leaders.

They are majoring in everything from biochemistry to business administration to social work. Their talents, work ethic and diversity bode well for our economy and society.

Our country has always been bold and progressive because our strengths are the endearing values and beliefs on which this country was founded. As long as we protect those values — including the fundamental belief that all men (and women) are created equally and all have the right to pursue happiness — we can meet any challenge.

Allow me to show you a short video about our DACA students. We are so very proud of our DACA students and honored to be part of Donald Graham's vision!

In closing, I want to go back to what I said at the beginning of my remarks. I said that leadership is about encouraging people to **do** their best, to **be** their best—for the good of all.

That means being **courageous** in the face of **difficulty**, being **vulnerable** in the face of **adversity**, and **trusting yourself and others** in the face of **doubt**. In committing and living by these principles, I shared five short lessons with you that I have learned in life:

1. Share authority
2. Share your humanity
3. Never compromise your values
4. Practice humility and grace
5. Do the right things, and good things will come

I hope my personal experiences illustrate these five lessons, and prompt reflection in each of you. I would like to open it up for questions and discussion—let's see if we can't expand the shared experiences in the room.