

BUILDING ON A STRONG FOUNDATION

University Meeting

Elsa M. Núñez

May 8, 2012

Good morning, my friends and colleagues. I want to talk with you today about our future, as we begin to think through the process of launching our next five-year strategic planning cycle.

I believe we are in great shape to take on the task of envisioning the next steps on our path to becoming a University of First Choice. Together we have built a strong foundation on which to plan the next five years.

I want you to imagine three giant slabs of stone, the building blocks on which we stand today.

They constitute the foundation on which we will continue to build the Eastern of our future. Let me tell you what constitutes each of those three stones.

Eastern's strongest asset is its people.

Next week marks the beginning of my seventh year as your president. I have been blessed these past six years to be part of a wonderful community.

When I call you my friends and colleagues, I truly mean it. Look around you — you are sitting with your friends and colleagues. The sense of community is strong on this campus because each of you is committed to being a contributing member of this team.

We talk about our Eastern community with pride. It is not a cliché. It is not trite. It is who we are.

Those of us who have worked at other colleges and universities can attest that not every campus community can hold up its culture with the same pride and sense of purpose that you can. Eastern is a great place to work — to study, to teach, to grow — because each of you has chosen to invest your own good will and energy into our common purpose.

The spirit of collegiality on our campus is visceral — our students feel it, our guests and visitors feel it. That is why our students take pride in our campus, why our visitors always feel welcome, and why, when I travel around our state to visit with alumni and friends of the University, the comments I hear about Eastern are always positive and genuine.

I am sharing these reflections about our Eastern culture not to reminisce or engage in exaggeration. How we treat each other is meaningful to everyone in this room. I try to treat you the way I would like to be treated. Our connectedness not only informs our daily behavior, it inspires and directs our intellectual life as we think about our future together. The people in this room and our other colleagues on campus are our first foundation stone.

Another strength of Eastern is the lessons we have learned about planning.

The current planning cycle is reaching its end, but we are certainly not starting over. We have a Strategic Plan in place that has seen progress on all 18 Strategic Initiatives.

Peter Bachiochi and Sudha Swaminathan will be speaking in a few minutes about the overall success of the plan and the assessment tools we have used to validate our progress.

The reason we have been moving up in the U.S. News and World Report and COPLAC rankings is because we have combined mindful intent with hard work. We used data and research to identify areas of improvement and we assigned additional resources to those areas. And then, as the mathematicians like to say, we “worked the problem.”

We should be pleased with our success . . . but we are not done yet. We want to continue to build on our success as we create a seamless bridge from the current Strategic Plan to an updated blueprint for the next five years. One way to do this is to put the lessons we have learned about planning to good use.

I am going to share my own observations about some of the things we have learned. But before I offer you my own impressions, I want to turn the podium over to Professors Bachiochi and Swaminathan to speak about some of their insights regarding the implementation phase of the 2008–2013 Strategic Plan. I think you will find their perspectives as faculty members especially meaningful.

As you recall, Peter was the chair of the Strategic Plan Implementation Steering Committee that helped the various teams and committees to move their initiatives forward toward implementation and institutionalization. In addition, as the Strategic Plan Assessment Coordinator, Sudha has been an excellent resource in coming up with strategies that helped us determine our effectiveness. Peter will speak first, followed by Sudha.

(PETER BACHIOCHI AND SUDHA SWAMINATHAN SPEAK)

Thank you, Peter and Sudha. As Professor Bachiochi has shared, the Strategic Plan involved a significant investment of time and energy by hundreds of people on our campus. It also was an act of discovery and growth.

We have learned a great deal. We learned about ourselves during the development of core values, a vision statement, and a revised mission. We learned about the economic and fiscal environment we work in as part of the Driving Forces subcommittee’s work. And we learned to be flexible.

As Professor Swaminathan noted, the various implementation teams have used sound assessment practices to gauge their effectiveness and when to make adjustments in their goals and strategies. For example, I think the changes we made in the First Year Program is an excellent case of how we were able to modify a major piece of our plan for better resource utilization and the benefit of students.

Assessment is not just to say “This is how far we have come,” but rather to use data to say, “Based on what has happened, this is what we need to do next.” And as Sudha’s analysis of trends related to transfer students pointed out, assessment can often reveal entirely new paths to consider.

As we look forward, there are several other key lessons we have learned that I want to be sure we carry forth from the current planning cycle as we develop the next roadmap for our future.

- First, time taken to gather facts to make informed decisions paid off. We have learned a great deal about gathering and analyzing data these past several years, and how to use evidence to make informed decisions. We will again be conducting important data gathering this summer before we begin the next planning cycle so that our discussions are based on sound information.
- Second, COFE was an inclusive, collaborative process that ultimately yielded a better product, and helped to ensure that the people implementing the strategies had ownership for their objectives from day one. With more than 250 people involved in the planning process, we created a map we all owned. At this time, I would like to publicly thank Professor Ron

Lowy for being my COFE co-chair and helping to ensure the transparency and inclusivity of the planning process.

- Third, we can never have too much transparency. We can always communicate better. We will strive to improve our strategic plan communications in areas where you felt improvements were needed and based on the feedback we have received.
- Finally, on leadership, we have leaders all across this campus. When I think about the faculty and staff who led many of our strategic initiative teams, I am so proud of the work that they and their teams accomplished. Although we were walking on new ground and with pretty high stakes, everyone dug in and, together, we navigated the planning process. We learned a lot to make the next process better. So many of you displayed leadership during that busy time . . . and we had fun doing it! Remember the chocolate covered coffee beans? The sombreros? Let's make sure we have fun again as we plan our next five years together.

You and I know that organizations often spend months on a planning document, only to print it up and toss it on a shelf to gather dust. We certainly have not done that. Our planning document is a guidepost that we have used to make decisions, allocate our limited resources based on priorities that we have established together, and validate our investments of time and money. We have made progress while demonstrating that a collaborative, inclusive planning process can give us the direction and the momentum we need to achieve our vision.

So, our second foundation stone is the knowledge we have gained as a team about how to plan our future together.

Then there is the wonderful progress we have made to move this institution forward during these past five years.

In order to ensure that the fruits of our 2008-2013 Strategic Plan are captured, preserved and moved forward, we held a planning retreat this past January. What was gratifying to me was that it was determined that every single one of our 18 initiatives had made progress.

At that retreat, two categories were created to classify the 18 initiatives. The consensus was that ten of our 18 strategic objectives had been institutionalized — they were now part of the fabric of our daily life at Eastern.

It was felt that the other eight initiatives could use some modifications; in some cases, very slight. For one thing, it was felt that the electronic portfolio concept could be strengthened and then made available as an option — not a requirement — to faculty and students. The enrollment management initiative will be rolled into the academic plan, as will the exemplary programs initiative.

There continues to be agreement that Liberal Arts Work! should eventually become a graduation requirement, but that we need to be more flexible in identifying what experiences qualify. We would also like to see greater participation in the Global Citizenship program, while dropping it as a graduation requirement. And there is widespread support for expanding awareness of the Social Justice and Diversity Council.

I would like to go into detail on a number of the Strategic Initiatives, not only to update you on their progress, but to demonstrate how each supports our vision to be an exemplary public liberal arts college — A University of First Choice.

LIBERAL ARTS WORK. As part of the planning process that yielded our current Strategic Plan, the faculty did a great deal of research. One area of the literature of great interest was the work of Dr. George Kuh, founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement.

He and his researchers have demonstrated that students who are engaged in “high impact practices” on campus are more successful, both in graduating on time and in their career pursuits. One of those high-impact practices is experiential learning — activities such as internships, faculty-sponsored undergraduate research, and service learning — which add value to the instruction students receive in the classroom.

Through this applied learning, students are able to make clear connections between the knowledge accumulated in their disciplines and the world beyond our campus. As our biology faculty likes to say, biology students conducting research get to “do biology.” Our accounting interns “do accounting.”

The LAW program has really taken off these past few years. We have interns in all corners of the country — from the Connecticut State Capitol, to Disney World, ESPN, St. Francis Hospital, the Connecticut Science Center, and dozens of other locations. Students earn money in paid co-ops for UTC or for Cigna right here on campus in our new Work Hub.

We had a record 120 students at our recent Research Conference and Exhibition, and four faculty members will be hiring summer research assistants for the first time. And service learning is occurring here in Willimantic and in lands far away.

More than 75 percent of our students report they have had applied learning experiences before graduation—59 percent have had an internship or coop; 12 percent have done research; 54 percent have performed community service; and 10 percent have studied abroad. Those numbers will only increase over time.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP. One of our core abilities is cultural awareness. Whether it is on our multi-cultural campus, or within the larger global society, our students need to engage the cultures around them, not only for their own economic success, but to be citizens of the world community.

The Global Citizenship program showed significant progress this past year, as a \$30,000 grant program was developed to provide travel scholarships to 65 students. We also saw a 25 percent increase in the number of on-campus events identified as meeting the global citizenship designation. Global field courses in London, Paris, Nepal, Jamaica, Italy and elsewhere also gave our students a chance to learn about new lands and new knowledge.

LIBERAL ARTS CORE. We are proud of the fact that all of our students share a common educational experience in the form of our Liberal Arts Core Curriculum. More than the coursework involved, the LAC provides an opportunity for each student to learn a set of intellectual skills — critical thinking, research and analysis, communications — that they all will need to be successful professionals and engaged citizens. The skills our students develop in the LAC are as important to their success as the content they learn in their majors.

We have truly institutionalized the LAC. When I hear graduates and students articulating the knowledge and skills they have learned in their liberal arts courses, I realize how far we have come these past five years.

CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Another important component of the Strategic Plan that has blossomed is the Center for Community Engagement. Creating the CCE was based on the realization that serving the local community, more than just an act of kindness, should have a strong educational component that also benefits the students performing the service. At that same time that our students practice the core value of Social Responsibility, they are meeting community needs and learning valuable skills.

Whether it is tutoring middle school math students, building houses in West Virginia and Willimantic, cleaning up state parks over spring break, or planning our sixth annual Day of

Giving, our students, faculty and staff demonstrated their commitment to the communities we serve this past year to the tune of 44,000 volunteer hours with a value of \$1.3 million.

In addition, the “We Care Info.org” website developed by Professor Citurs’ Business Information Systems students for non-profits is just one example of how service learning is taking off on our campus and in the community. Other faculty members are also finding new service learning opportunities.

It was a pleasant surprise when we heard in March that Eastern had made President Obama’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll With Distinction, one of only 110 schools in the country to achieve that honor.

ACADEMIC SERVICES CENTER. The Student Success Model, realized through our Academic Services Center, had a basic premise — that every one of our students, whether a freshman with 1500 SATs or a senior struggling to finish their final project, could benefit from stronger academic support services.

The Academic Services Center plays a vital role in our mission. Our job is not just to admit students, offer them instruction, and hope for the best.

While we have an obligation to challenge our students to develop their academic skills and knowledge, we also have an equal obligation to help them succeed.

The ASC makes a significant contribution to this effort. Through an enhanced advising system, a team of faculty and peer tutors, and other services, we are impacting students’ academic progress at every level.

More than 5,000 students are visiting the center upwards of 15,000 times a year. The five student development specialists as well as peer and professional tutors are having a big impact on retention and persistence. Our Peer Tutors even published a guide book on their experiences this past fall.

And 79 percent of students interviewed say they were satisfied or very satisfied with our new advising program.

STUDENT CENTER. I suspect everyone in the room has heard or read the literature on the importance of student life on a residential campus. With more than 60 percent of our students living on campus, it has been absolutely imperative that we provide them with a stimulating and educational campus life experience. To that end, the Student Center has become the campus’s living room. Students enjoy a rich array of activities in the Student Center, ranging from club events to events sponsored by the Campus Activity Board.

Of special note — our own data shows that club participation, like other “engaged learning” activities, improves student academic performance. This past year, club members had an average GPA of 3.01, which was 6% higher than our overall student body. Since 2008, club participation has increased 28%, the number of clubs has increased 25%, and the number of club programs has increased 38%.

RESIDENTIAL LIFE. One of the things we wanted to achieve as part of the current Strategic Plan was to create a bridge between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. I think we have been successful in providing instructional faculty with opportunities to participate in and impact our students’ lives outside the classroom.

They understand that if we are to become a liberal arts University of First Choice, campus life must be as strong as our academic programs. A key to our Residential Life initiative is the Academic Performance Notification early warning system that faculty have been using to notify the ASC Center of Students experiencing academic difficulty. New to the process is that

Student Affairs and Housing staff are now involved and can intervene quickly in assisting students at risk.

Another new element of our Residential Life programming is the use of a Social Change Model based on research conducted at UCLA that emphasizes the development of personal values, self-awareness, and leadership skills.

Within this model is a particular focus on the first six-weeks of freshman attendance, when the risk of dropping out of college is the greatest.

In addition, the Office of Career Services now visits our residence halls to help freshmen decide their major. In addition, the Housing and Residential Life Office continues to bring new social activities to campus as part of our Friday after Dark programming.

Learning communities are also being created in the residence halls so that students in a program can continue to grow and flourish outside of the classroom, with classmates who share their interests and passions.

Given our focus on student learning, the initiatives I have just mentioned constitute the heart of what we do.

But we had a number of non-instructional and non-student services initiatives that have also moved the University forward. Let me mention three of them.

MASTER PLAN. The Master Plan is another example of our integrated Strategic Plan, with component parts supporting our vision of being a premier residential liberal arts campus. In the case of the Master Plan, that means moving towards a greener, more pedestrian campus, with less concrete and asphalt and a stronger residential focus.

Despite the austere state budget, we have made some progress on the Master Plan. Our women's softball team has its new softball field, where their success is making national headlines.

Last fall, our newest class of freshmen entered the campus through a brand-new, beautiful entrance.

And we have seen the first design models of the new Fine Arts Building. All of this strengthens our mission as a residential liberal arts campus.

DEVELOPMENT. Increasing educational access, improving retention by helping students to pay for their schooling throughout their four years at Eastern, and enhancing our academic programs are all objectives of the Development Office. It continues to be the model for other state universities. Not only does Eastern raise more money than any of the other three state universities, we continue to increase the number of alumni donors.

We must remember that our students and their families face difficult economic times as well.

Through the hard work of the Development Office, many of our students are given the opportunity to receive the liberal arts education that is vital to their future success.

Last month, the ECSU Foundation gave a record \$450,000 to 300 students. The Development Office, in collaboration with the ECSU Foundation, also has provided financial support and sponsored such campus events and programs, as the Alumni Fellows, LAW forums, the Education Symposium, and the first major conference for the Center for Early Childhood Education.

All this helps to raise the quality of our educational programs, enhance our reputation, and support our students.

DIVERSITY: Our diversity plan is another aspect of Eastern's commitment to providing students with a breadth of cultural perspectives, while also ensuring that we have a

welcoming, inclusive community. One thing I am very proud of is the news we received earlier this year that Eastern has the largest percentage of minority faculty of any college or university in the state of Connecticut or in COPLAC.

To help lead our efforts to further develop a culture of inclusivity, I am pleased today to announce that Dr. Stacey Close has agreed to assume the leadership role as Interim Associate Vice President for Diversity. Please join me in congratulating Dr. Close.

These are some highlights of what we have accomplished this year. We stand tall on three foundation stones — our people, the lessons we have learned, and the progress we have made. On this strong foundation, we are poised to continue our record of achievement as we craft a new blueprint for continued success. How shall we proceed?

As your president, I believe I have two primary roles related to strategic planning. First and of foremost, it is my responsibility to keep us on track to fulfill our vision as a University of First Choice.

What is my vision? It is simple. We share in the desire to be a premier public liberal arts university and to be recognized as such. We are not an elite national university like Harvard. We are not a land grant university like UCONN. We are not a private baccalaureate school like Williams. Those are circles we are not part of. Our measure is the world of public liberal arts colleges. As a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges, we are currently right in the middle of COPLAC on various accountability measures.

While we are inching up the ladder on a number of those measures, most observers would tell you that SUNY-Geneseo is considered at the top of the COPLAC institutions.

Geneseo, move over!

I want us to focus our attention in the next five years on becoming what Geneseo is today, a premier public liberal arts university. Why not Eastern? Let's make that happen!

Given what I know about the people in this room, I truly believe we can do it. We need to analyze our position, reaffirm our strengths, identify opportunities, and map out a plan for achieving what I believe is a very realistic goal.

As I think of how we are going to achieve the goal of becoming a premier public liberal arts university with a national reputation, at the same time we respond to the needs of our own state, I begin to ask myself questions.

Perhaps these questions will also resonate with you, and will cause you to develop new ideas, strategies, and tactics that will lead us to fulfilling our vision.

CONSIDER THAT . . . It is our academic reputation that ultimately attracts students, raises our national rankings, and enhances the credentials of our graduates.

1. So, how can we continue to strengthen our academic standards and our academic reputation so that we can attract students who are the best fit for our unique brand of liberal arts education grounded in practical applications?

CONSIDER THAT . . . Most students attend college with the intention of obtaining a degree.

2. That begs the question of how to encourage students to finish their studies on time so that we maximize the number of students who receive their diplomas at Commencement. Keep in mind that the new Regents are looking at new measures of success for our Connecticut universities. Are we producing graduates? That is where our ability to educate transfer students will help us.

CONSIDER THAT . . . 68 percent of jobs in Connecticut in the next decade will require some form of college degree.

3. Therefore, how can we ensure that all our graduates leave Eastern with the skills they need to be successful in today's workforce? Are they prepared to enter an increasingly competitive job market?

CONSIDER THAT . . . national data is conclusive — students who live on campus, supported by a strong campus life program, do better academically.

4. So how do we enhance our campus culture so that we continue to support and emphasize our residential, liberal arts mission?

CONSIDER THAT . . . our mission as a social and economic catalyst for the region constitutes a commitment to providing educational opportunities for working adults in eastern Connecticut.

5. Therefore, in these austere economic times, how can we strengthen our graduate programs to make them attractive and relevant to the busy adult student?

CONSIDER THAT . . . our greatest strength as an organization is the people who come to work and teach at Eastern each day.

6. So, how do we strengthen our own workforce, the people in this room, so that we have a diverse community made up of individuals who we are providing sufficient support to maximize their own potential?

FINALLY, CONSIDER THAT . . . Connecticut has the greatest gap in educational achievement among its children in the country.

7. And so I ask myself, how can our University have the greatest impact on the communities we live and work in to impact this and other social and economic inequity?

I am sure other questions will come to you as you think about how we can move forward towards our goal of becoming a premier public liberal arts university. We should expect nothing less of ourselves. That means asking tough questions, thinking outside of the box, and daring ourselves to try new ideas, while having the resolve to maintain those ideas that we have proven to work.

My second responsibility in strategic planning is to work with other campus leaders to develop a planning structure and process that will encourage campus-wide, broad-based discussion.

We want all the voices on this campus to be heard, because we have learned that when all of us are thinking about our shared future, great ideas emerge.

So how do we get there? What will be our structure and process for developing the next five-year strategic plan? To me, there are two simple criteria for helping us construct the next planning process. We need to remain connected to the work we have done, maintaining momentum and institutionalizing the progress we have made.

At the same time, we need to aggressively seek new ideas and new opportunities for achieving our goal to be an exemplary public liberal arts university.

To start the planning process today, I would like to announce some of the structure we are going to use beginning this fall as we start to work on the new strategic plan.

I am pleased to announce that I have asked Bill Salka, chair of the Political Science Department, to serve as my co-chair on the Strategic Planning Committee. While I intend to have less structure overall, you can expect to see representatives from faculty, staff, the student body and our ECSU Foundation on the committee. Over the summer, we will be gathering information and data so that our decisions are based on sound evidence. Subcommittees will be established and will conduct their work in the fall. I hope that when you get the call, you will decide to participate.

I would expect to have a draft plan for campus-wide review and vetting by December 31st. We will spend the spring 2013 semester responding to the draft, and I would hope we could have an approved plan a year from now. Implementation would begin in fall 2013. To help facilitate the process, I also intend to hire a planning consultant to ensure that we make the best use of our own time and expertise.

The people in this room are resilient. Three years ago, this nation experienced the worst economic recession since the Great Depression.

You responded by rolling up your sleeves to find new ways to save money, cut costs and balance our budget.

Even so, you held your head up and moved ahead on our strategic plan, finding efficiencies, reallocating resources, and taking the attitude that we would get the job done no matter what.

Our fiscal challenges persist, and we must continue to work against a backdrop of austerity and the need for prudent financial management. Nonetheless, I think we are in great shape. Our academic reputation is improving. You have laid the foundation for enhancing our educational programs. We have support services in place to improve student success as measured by our retention and graduation rates.

We are discovering new ways to provide our students with applied learning experiences to ground their liberal arts classroom experiences. We continue to strengthen our institutional systems. And our campus continues to evolve as a beautiful residential learning community.

I look forward to our next planning cycle with anticipation and excitement. We have come far these past six years, and we have done it together. Each of you has been part of that progress. I am confident that with the will and intellectual capacity in this room we are fully capable of doing more great things together.

Building on the three cornerstones of our foundation — our people, the lessons we have learned about planning, and the progress we have made together, I truly believe we can become a premier public liberal arts college in this country.

Let me leave you with one more reminder of how far we have come on our Strategic Plan. I want to share with you a few highlights of the profile for our entering freshman class this fall. I think you would agree that the entering class is a good barometer of where we are.

- Freshman applications for the fall are up 43%. That's not a typo . . . 43%!
- SAT scores for paid deposits are up six points. We are almost 1040.
- With almost four months to go, we have already exceeded our goal for freshman tuition deposits. We wanted 915 and we have 918 deposits.
- We are up 50% in out-of-state students over last year.
- And our housing deposits are up over last year by 4%.

Again, we are on the right track, and when those freshmen arrive this August, we will be well on our way to drawing the next roadmap for our future. So have a wonderful summer — because we will be busy in the fall!