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“Five Levels of Leadership”
Women in Education Leadership
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Good morning. What a beautiful Sunday morning! It’s my pleasure to be with you today to talk about developing leadership among women in education. First of all, I want to congratulate all of you for being accepted to participate in this important and prestigious program. Harvard University is our nation’s oldest institution of higher learning—many would say it is our finest—and it has been preparing America’s leaders for almost 400 years. The Graduate School of Education, which celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2020, created the first doctoral program in Education in our country, and remains one of the premier graduate schools in education in the world. You are indeed fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to learn and grow within these walls.

We are also fortunate to have such a diverse, representative group of women leaders in education with us. There are K-12 and higher education representatives from Washington State, from Tennessee and Los Angeles, from New Mexico, Ohio and Connecticut. There are even women here from Australia, Canada, and Brazil. The rich diversity of knowledge and experience that is represented in the room today is going to serve us well over the next few days—moments like these are a gift to us all!

I want to begin by thanking Deborah Jewell-Sherman for inviting me to join the faculty for this program, and I am delighted to be included in this illustrious group of noted professionals and experts. You have already heard Deborah describe her work in the Richmond, Virginia school system, and the courage she displayed in fighting for equal opportunity for disadvantaged children in that community. I know that each of the faculty has important insights and concepts to share with you as you engage the issue of growing your personal leadership skills.

My own task is to spend the next 90 minutes or so with you looking at leadership development as an organic evolution—a series of stages that reflect the natural growth of leadership skills.

I am basing my remarks on John Maxwell’s book, “Five Levels of Leadership.” I understand that you have been given some brief reading and video review assignments related to Dr. Maxwell’s book, and each of you has completed the leadership self-assessment found in the book. You will be using those a bit later.

I am going to review in fairly quick fashion the five levels in Dr. Maxwell’s model, and will use some of the landmarks in my own career and leadership development to illustrate his points. Following my remarks, we are going to break up the room into small groups. At that time, you can use your self-assessments and personal experiences to discuss some study questions we have prepared for you. That’s the outline for my presentation, now let me begin.

Before I delve into Dr. Maxwell’s leadership model, I want to briefly give you a sense of my own personal background. Like everyone else in this room, my personal journey has served as the foundation for my career and the growth of my leadership skills.

I was born in the western mountains of Puerto Rico and moved with my family to the housing projects of Newark, New Jersey, when I was eight years old, the oldest of three children. No one in my family spoke a word of English when we arrived as one of the first Puerto Rican

families in Newark, and we depended on the generosity of strangers to help us gain footing in our new country. Neither of my parents had as much as a high school education, but they worked hard in the factories of New Jersey so that my brothers and I could be educated and succeed in America.

I went to an all-girls Catholic high school—the best in New Jersey—and worked hard to repay my parents for their love and devotion. I entered Montclair State College as a freshman in 1966, and through the support of faculty mentors and what have become lifelong friends, I overcame my language and cultural barriers and graduated as the only Latina in my class.

Graduate school followed and I eventually became a member of the faculty at Ramapo College, the first step in a career path in higher education that has spanned more than 45 years. I share this brief personal story with you because it has informed my value system and the work that I have done as a college professor and administrator over these many years.

Now let me get into Dr. Maxwell's Five Levels of Leadership and describe how my own career and leadership development aligns with his model. Maxwell's first level of Leadership is "**Position.**" This is the leadership and power you have by virtue of your job title, no more. You could be the president of a company, or just the head gardener in a public park or lead dishwasher in a restaurant. At this level, people follow you because they must. You are "the boss." You are "management." You are "my superior." You cannot help being at this level. We all have to start here! But the longer you stay there, without the benefit of the trust and respect earned through building relationships with your people, the lower morale will be, the higher turnover will be, and the slower progress will be.

People who work for you should want to work together and toward a common goal because your vision inspires them, not because they fear you or defer to your position.

People who are motivated by the position of their leader(s) alone are rarely innovative, are not truly loyal, and do not maximize their talents. They give minimum effort. As Dr. Maxwell counsels, "Leave your position and move toward your people."

My own beginnings in a job with "position" were right out of college, when I worked as an Upward Bound instructor, then a high school teacher, before my first job as a professor at Ramapo State College in New Jersey. The only people who had to follow my directions were my students . . . period. But I worked hard, and I was willing to do whatever I was asked. At some point, the English Department chair at my college asked me if I wanted to help with some of the more mundane administrative tasks in the department—ordering supplies and textbooks, scheduling class sections—and I had my foot in the door to my administrative career. I was ready for the next level in developing my leadership skills.

The next level is **Permission.** This is an interesting word to describe leadership that occurs within a collaborative environment. At first, given the role that relationship building takes at this level, I thought that perhaps "Relationships" would be a better title for this chapter of Dr. Maxwell's book. But if you take the view of the people who are following you, it makes perfect sense. By creating an environment where you welcome input, where you value each person and encourage a wide variety of voices, where you empower members of your team to be part of the decision-making, the power you are being granted is "permitted" by the whole team. Anything less means you have not truly empowered your whole team to mutually own the group's decisions and work.

Of course, everyone understands that certain decisions—staffing, budget, capital expenses—are ultimately held by the head of an organization. However, to the degree that each member of your team feels that they are making a voluntary decision to follow your lead, you

will have given individuals the power to participate as equals in a cause greater than any one of you.

By the way, this level of leadership does not have to wait to take place until you are in a senior management role. It didn't in my own case, and the experience I am about to describe has informed my leadership approach ever since. More than 40 years ago, I was a young faculty member in the English Department at Ramapo College in New Jersey. I really didn't have much power, no more than granted to me as an instructor. But I loved my work, I enjoyed the people I worked with, and I worked hard to earn their respect and confidence.

At some point, another woman on the faculty was denied tenure by her department and the college. A special tenure committee was selected to hear her appeal, and my colleagues in our department selected me for membership on the committee because they trusted me to be neutral and fair-minded in my deliberations. They permitted me to have power over this person's career, despite my lack of position, because I had gained their trust and respect.

In our deliberations, we determined that there had been bias within the faculty ranks in rejecting the woman's tenure candidacy, and she eventually was granted tenure. Of course, I felt very strongly that we had done the right thing. And the experience taught me the importance of merit—over position—in establishing trust and respect among your colleagues.

When I arrived at Eastern Connecticut State University in 2006, I had already had more than 35 years in higher education, more than 20 years of that as an administrator. But I realized that my prior experiences, while helpful in guiding my actions, could not replace due diligence. I was in a new community, on a new campus with new colleagues. Only by taking time to get to know the new people around me would I be able to reestablish the trust and respect that I valued so highly in my prior positions. I was fortunate in this regard to have joined a relatively small-sized campus in a town of 20,000 people. The first week I was there, during the town's monthly street festival, I was able to meet hundreds of townspeople and get a sense of the pride and cultural diversity that marks our community.

Over the following months on campus, I met with every department and office on campus and established personal connections on a first-name basis with many of the faculty and staff at Eastern.

I visited all of our dormitories, and with 60 percent of students living on campus, I was able to connect with a significant number of students. I also meet regularly with our Student Government Association, the student leaders on our campus.

As a result, I get to know many of our students. There is nothing like getting a hug on stage at Commencement from a student who you have followed since their freshman year! I also have joined local boards whenever possible—the local soup kitchen, local foundations, the local hospital, the Girl Scouts, a local summer camp for developmentally disabled children.

Like many of you, I have been honored to be appointed to a number of national boards. But the local boards and organizations I continue to support in and around the town where my campus is located keep me connected to the people. These same organizations are the nonprofits and other agencies where our students volunteer.

I can think of no better way to build relationships — lasting relationships — than to show your face and lend a hand.

Developing these two circles of influence — internally on our campus, and externally out in the community — was essential to making the fundamental changes on our campus and in the community that I wanted to facilitate. The former—internal networking—was critical to forming the close-knit, collaborative team we needed to implement growth and progress on

campus. The latter—strengthening our external partnerships—was important to our mission as a public institution and a resource and change agent in our state.

All this sounds strategic and mindful—and it was—but if the people you are trying to build relationships don't feel that you care, it won't work. You cannot fake authenticity!

By early 2008, I felt we were ready for our next step at Eastern—development and implementation of a new Strategic Plan, an endeavor that aligns nicely with Dr. Maxwell's next level in leadership development—**Production**. This is the level where you have established a strong cohesive team, ready to tackle challenges facing the institution, ready to effect change.

In 2004, prior to my arrival at Eastern, the University had been accepted as a member of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges, a national advocacy group of approximately 25 moderately sized campuses that were publicly funded, but nonetheless were committed to the liberal arts and liberal education. Joining Eastern as president in 2006 offered me a wonderful opportunity to be part of the University's efforts to give structure and substance to its vision to be an exemplary public liberal arts institution. I knew that we would only be successful if we could engage the entire campus in planning our collective future.

I wanted to empower faculty and staff in sharing the decisions we would be making. And I wanted to remain true to a commitment to excellence that I share with our faculty and staff. This was the foundation of intellectual rigor on which we built our plans for the next chapter in Eastern's history.

We ended up with more than 300 faculty and staff actively involved in our planning process, with faculty co-chairs for our planning committees. Two overriding themes were presented to the planning teams, two questions for us to answer collectively. How could we become more distinctive as a public, liberal arts institution, and how could we provide our students with a deeper, more engaging experience on our campus, one that would better position them for success after graduation. Planning teams were empowered to explore all possibilities within these two parameters.

It has been nine years since we launched our 2008–13 Strategic Plan, and three years since we amended that plan to add objectives and activities for the 2013–18 planning period. We have been productive, no doubt. What I am most pleased about is that the goal we had when we started — to create a living plan that reflected the work of our entire campus and is truly owned by all — has been achieved. No one calls it “President Núñez's Strategic Plan.” No one has to dig around in a box or search a dusty bookshelf to find the plan. And components of the plan have become our common vocabulary.

The plan, because of the inclusive process we used to produce and implement it, has strengthened us as an organization and as a community of professionals invested in each other and our students. It drives our budget and informs our annual departmental plans.

Innovations and milestones from the plan are many-fold. To strengthen student engagement, we created an office of undergraduate research, established the Center for Community Engagement, and strengthened the first-year program. To improve student retention, we developed a model to predict freshman success and used it to establish at-risk cohorts and high-touch interventions, including peer tutoring, expanded professional advising, and an early warning system in the dormitories. We created a one-stop-shop Academic Services Center that serves almost half our students each year with supplemental instruction, tutoring and other services. We also created a student leadership program tied to our student clubs and organizations to identify and support specific leadership skills development.

Our graduation rate is up, our U.S. News and World Report ranking is up, and other measures of broad institutional success are on the upswing. Several years ago, I was especially gratified when the Education Trust released a report showing that Eastern had the largest increase (almost a tripling) of the six-year graduation rate of Latino students over a five-year period, and African American students have experienced similar gains. While our retention efforts have been created to serve all students, minority students have clearly benefited from our commitment to educational access. In addition to the programmatic initiatives I have mentioned, we have also worked hard to hire minority faculty. Today, Eastern has the highest percentage of minority faculty of any university or college in Connecticut, including UCONN, Yale and Wesleyan.

How does our team feel about Eastern? Each year, an independent organization surveys our employees and evaluates campus climate and morale as part of the Chronicle of Higher Education's "Great Colleges to Work For" program. We have been named a "Great College" each of the seven times we have participated in the program; last year, we were the only public four-year institution in New England to receive this recognition.

The fourth stage in Dr. Maxwell's model is **People Development**. It seems to be a natural progression to creating a strong, functional team of educational professionals. "People development" is not necessarily only the prerogative of the CEO, but certainly as organizational leaders, we have the ability and the responsibility to support the leadership development of those around us. Leadership experts like Dr. Maxwell and the late Stephen Covey would tell you that leadership is not about creating leaders, nor is leadership found principally at the top levels of an organization. Developing trusting relationships, building consensus, articulating a shared vision, and supporting common goals should be occurring throughout our organizations. As followers become leaders, some move on to higher level roles in other organizations, while others move up in your organization.

Leadership is about aligning the vision of the people who work for/with you, and bringing out each person's talents. Leadership is about motivating and teaching. When everyone in your organization is committed to sharing their expertise and being open to change and growth, everyone becomes a teacher and everyone becomes a learner. The sum of the parts gets multiplied by the number of people in your organization, especially when leaders are committed to growing leadership to replenish and replace senior leaders while helping people move up within the ranks.

Developing people takes time; it is not likely to occur when you are new to an organization, are busy establishing relationships, or are devoted to facilitating institutional change across your organization.

I can tell you from my own experience that this stage of leadership, like the others, tends to take place in organic fashion—it happens when it is time to happen. In the past few years, I have enjoyed seeing members of my team develop their own leadership skills to the point where they are ready for new challenges. Two years ago, our Provost left to become president at the University of St. Joseph in West Hartford. Dr. Free had been in the middle of all the institutional changes and academic innovations we had made as part of our Strategic Plan, and she was absolutely ready for a college presidency.

Over the past three years, three other senior members of our team have left our campus to take on leadership roles at our system office of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System. While we certainly miss their knowledge and working with them on a daily basis, it is wonderful to know their talents are recognized at the state level, and it is reassuring to know they

are working on behalf of all 17 institutions in our system. I have also enjoyed supporting faculty seeking to advance to administrative positions, and in the past few years, we have had two faculty members accepted as American Council on Education Fellows, and several others accepted into other regional and national leadership programs, including one of our women faculty members who was accepted into the Higher Education Resource Services Leadership Institute for Women in Denver.

While we are focused on the issue of developing leadership skills among educational professionals—faculty, staff and administrators—all of us started our careers as students, and I may get my greatest pleasure from supporting **student leaders** pursuing their dreams.

We have Eastern students on the student leadership council of the NCAA; student leaders in regional and national honors programs; and Eastern alumni pursuing graduate programs at prestigious universities across the country. Every time a student comes to me for counsel or a letter of recommendation, I take the time to give them my best advice or a kind word of support. Can there be a more important “people development” task for an educational leader than to support the leadership of your students? I don’t think so. Here’s another interesting fact for you—more than 150 Eastern alumni work at Eastern! I believe that is because they have been well-prepared to be leaders on our campus and because they wanted to come back to a place where they know they will be respected.

We have come to the fifth and last level in Dr. Maxwell’s model—**Pinnacle**. When I saw this word, I was a little unnerved.

Pinnacle means the top of the mountain. The end of the trail. Nowhere to go but back down the mountain. But I know Dr. Maxwell wasn’t implying the end of one’s leadership responsibilities—only the culminating stage in his model. Because the fact is, leaders at this stage still must continue to build relationships—that should never stop. We still have to facilitate innovation and change on our campuses and in our organizations; productivity and accountability have never been more expected from public colleges and universities. And we surely must continue to support and develop tomorrow’s leaders—beginning as I said by facilitating leadership development among our own students.

But clearly at some point in one’s leadership development, there are opportunities to serve beyond our own organizations, to take the lessons we are learned and the values we hold dear to support groups of people, ideals, and principles beyond our own campuses.

At Eastern, I have been fortunate to continue to have such opportunities. As the vice president for the state universities in our system of state colleges and universities, I am working on several major statewide initiatives. I co-chair the council responsible for improving teacher education programs in our state. As the vice-president for state universities in our state system of public colleges and universities, I have a number of statewide planning and oversight responsibilities. I was also fortunate to have the opportunity to help our state improve our remediation programs throughout our K-20 system in response to new state legislation.

I am also on any number of national boards in support of causes and educational initiatives I believe in. I am the incoming chair of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the premier national advocacy group for liberal education.

I am also on the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, as well as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and the President’s Council for NCAA’s Division III.

I do not do these things for my own sake—after almost 50 years at this, the last thing you think about is your resume! I lend my voice to the national dialog on education for more important reasons.

First, my team allows me to. By that, I mean that we have a high performing team of professions on my campus who are committed to a shared vision, have experience working together, and keep our campus running smoothly in my absence. My senior staff also keep me grounded. The one thing I believe they know I value and encourage above all other attributes is their willingness to question my ideas and theirs. The last thing that you need as leaders are followers who are not ready to be leaders themselves. There is no more important skill than critical thinking: the willingness and ability to question ideas and consider alternatives.

Secondly, I work on national educational issues because I have been asked to serve. It is humbling and always an honor to be approached to work on important issues impacting our nation. I try to focus on and accept assignments that align with my values and with the work we do at Eastern. And in doing so, I have found that I can often take my work on the national stage back to my campus to help inform our work and facilitate innovation.

Before we break up into groups, let me share some summary thoughts on leadership development. It is not management. It is not about developing your career. It is not about “creating” leaders. Leadership is the ability to motivate people to facilitate growth and change. It’s about advancing the vision and the goals of the team. And it’s an ongoing process.

Leadership is helping people get things done, and it can and should occur throughout your organization. It is about developing new leaders, preparing for your own succession. It is a job never finished! If you focus on those objectives, good things will happen to your enterprise—and to you! When you see the work done by the teams you have empowered to serve people you may never meet—what sweet satisfaction!

Now, in keeping with the principle of empowering the team, it’s time for me to turn this session over . . . to you! We are going to divide up into small groups and let you spend some time together reflecting on Dr. Maxwell’s Five Levels of Leadership and how they apply to your experiences and lives.