

“Closing the Achievement Gap for College Students: Strategies for Success”
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Good Afternoon! When I saw the time allotted for this segment of the conference — an hour and fifteen minutes! — I realized that “keep it short and simple” wasn’t going to work this afternoon. But I could not help thinking of something that Thomas Jefferson once said: “Speeches that are measured by the hour will die within the hour.” The good news today is that my remarks are only 45 minutes long! Given the amount of time I will be speaking today, I will have some short breaks in my narrative for you.

Whether a speech is two minutes long or two hours long, good ideas should be memorable. As Winston Churchill once remarked, “All great things are simple, and many can be expressed in single words: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope.” So as I speak with you today about student success on our campuses, I will try to share some simple ideas with you, ideas you can take away with you to reflect upon later. So let me begin.

First, I would like to thank my good friend Sylvia Manning and the Board of Trustees for extending me this opportunity to speak with you at this year’s annual conference of the Higher Education Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. It is a great honor for me to stand before you today. As I look across this army of educators, representing more than 1,000 colleges and universities in 19 states, I am struck by the amount of knowledge, expertise, dedication, energy, and creativity found in this room. College students in the central region of our great nation are fortunate to have you as their educational leaders.

Again, thank you for allowing me to speak with you today. I come to you as a colleague, someone who has had the fortune of being involved in higher education for more than 40 years. I hope today to share some of my own experiences with you as you go about the task of improving your institutions through the process of self-examination and planned improvement.

My interest in your work comes from two perspectives. As a university president, I am challenged by the same issues that you confront each day on your campuses. Just as many of you are in some stage of the Self-Study and Reaccreditation process, I have also been involved with the task of institutional self-reflection, renewal, and improvement. As a faculty member at Ramapo College in New Jersey for many years, as an administrator in the City University of New York System and later in Massachusetts and in Maine, and now as the president of Eastern Connecticut State University, I have gone through a number of Self-Studies, Site Visits, Exit Interviews, Follow Up Reports, and other components of the Accreditation process. So we all share these common experiences.

I was also fortunate for four years to be the chair of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the arm of NEASC that, like the Higher Learning Commission, supports the accreditation of colleges and universities in New England. At the same time that my role on the Commission provided me with additional opportunities to discover best practices on college campuses, it also helped me to see a bigger picture, one that embraces education from preschool to graduate school. This experience has reaffirmed my belief that education must be seen as a lifelong continuum, with public policy put into place and practices instituted that recognize this fundamental fact.

These two perspectives—that of a former college professor and long-time university administrator subject to the purview of accrediting agencies, as well as someone responsible for

representing an accrediting agency—hopefully give me a unique opportunity to share insights with you today on a topic that all of us care deeply about. Closing the achievement gap and improving the retention and graduation of college students from underrepresented populations is one of the pressing matters on the minds of everyone in this room.

Before I share some of the things we are doing at Eastern Connecticut State University to support at-risk students, let me congratulate a number of HLC member institutions who are also providing leadership in retaining students from underrepresented populations.

In the same Education Trust report described in your program that recognized my own University for the improvement of six-year graduation rates of Hispanic students, seven members of the Higher Learning Commission were also among the nation's leaders in improving the success of Hispanics in college, including Oklahoma State University; the University of Kansas; the University of Colorado-Denver; Illinois State University; Grand Valley State University in Michigan; the University of Notre Dame; and the University of Chicago. A similar study that showed improving graduation rates for African American students reported Marquette University, Iowa State University, the University of Iowa, and Miami University among the nation's leaders. I would ask anyone representing these 11 institutions to stand and be recognized.

The Education Trust described a number of themes running across its two studies, themes being addressed on many of the campuses represented in the room today. The report urged colleges and universities to bridge the academic and residential lives of our students; involve faculty in student success outside of the classroom; develop early warning systems to identify and serve at-risk students; and create a culture of higher expectations and achievement on our campuses.

As I share the background of how we have improved the success rates of Hispanic students at Eastern Connecticut State University, I will be talking about four different aspects of our University—the ideas or strategies we have put into place; our campus culture and how we work together; our mission as Connecticut's public liberal arts college; and some of the individual people who have contributed to our success.

As described in your program, an Education Trust report this past fall indicated that Eastern had achieved the greatest percentage increase in the six-year graduation rates of Hispanic students of any public institution, in a national study conducted by the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group.

The Education Trust study examined the graduation rates of 391 public and private colleges and universities in the United States, detailing the results for African American, Hispanic and white students, as well as the overall graduation rates of all students at those institutions.

For the class of full-time, first-time students entering in fall 1998, the six-year graduation rate was barely 20 percent for Hispanic students at Eastern. However, for those Hispanic students entering in 2004, the proportion who had graduated by 2010 was 57.8 percent, the largest improvement among the 228 public institutions in The Education Trust study. Our improvement rate of 37.8 percent far exceeded the overall improvement rate among the study's 391 institutions, which was 3.5 percent, as well as the 3.9 percent improvement rate among the study's 228 public colleges and universities.

Of course, we were very pleased and humbled to receive this news of improved success rates for Hispanic students on our campus. However, from the outset, I want to broaden this

discussion beyond ethnicity. We are certainly proud of the data I have just shared with you, for it speaks to the success of students who up to now have either been excluded from the opportunity of a college degree or have not had the tools or support to succeed once they have arrived on a college campus.

However, the systems and strategies we have put into place on our campus have been implemented with at-risk students in mind regardless of their ethnic background. This is my first point today—the achievement gap in our schools and colleges is not about race or ethnicity.

It is also not about urban vs. suburban students, although the data shows the achievement gap disproportionately impacts students of color in our cities. **It is about family income.** The reality is that the 46 million people in our nation living in poverty face a set of systemic socioeconomic conditions that span generations of families. Poverty is color blind. Students from low-income families, regardless of ethnic heritage, face an uphill battle to go to college, graduate, and embark on professional careers.

As educators, we must have a two-fold agenda—to serve the students who make it to our doorstep, while also doing everything we can to deal with the conditions that create the poverty cycle in the first place.

Let me tell you what we are doing on our campus to serve students from underrepresented populations that enroll at Eastern Connecticut State University. Just as the achievement gap is about economics, not ethnicity, we have found that most of the strategies we have put into place to serve students from low-income families benefit all our students; they are not simply available to or accessed by those who may need them most. So that is my second point today: retention strategies should be available to all students, even as they may be funded and designed for the direct purpose of supporting minority students, those from low-income families, or those who are first-generation college students. These three cohorts, by the way, constitute 51 percent of our student body.

Here are some of the programmatic initiatives we have put into place to increase the success rates of Hispanics and students from other underrepresented populations.

In fall 2008, as part of our 2008–13 Strategic Plan, we opened the Academic Services Center on the ground floor of our library. The center combines tutoring services, advising services, a writing center, a math lab and several other services previously housed across the campus. Using Title III and Nellie Mae Education Foundation grants, we hired six additional professional advisors; doubled our team of tutors while developing a peer tutor program; and created a swipe card system to track student usage. Through faculty and self-referrals, more than 2,000 students a year—40 percent of our undergraduates—total more than 10,000 visits a year to the center. Those visits are paying off: our data shows that students who receive tutoring in the writing center and math center significantly improve their GPAs and their chances of graduation.

The center does not exclusively serve our at-risk population. How many of us in this room can write an essay without fear, but find a quadratic equation to be the equivalent of cod liver oil? How many mathematicians and scientists in the room remember moments of writer's block in their past? Raise your hands!

Like all of us, even our Honors students, students who often tutor other students in their major, can have a difficult subject on their own class schedule. We want them to go to the Academic Services Center and feel comfortable getting the help they need, usually through a peer tutor who is better at that particular subject than they are. We believe that advising, career counseling, discipline-specific tutoring, and other support services should be accessible on our campus for all students, and seen as positive opportunities, not as signs of weakness or failure.

Our peer tutors have even written a guide for student tutors who will follow in their footsteps. It is all part of a culture of teaching and learning on our campus—we all have something we can offer, and we all have something we can learn.

We also encourage students to declare their major as soon as they get here so that they have a career goal and an educational plan to work with. To help them do this, our career center goes into the freshman dormitories to counsel students on career options and encourage them to think about their future even in their first year.

Another part of our Student Success model is a renewed commitment to advising. In addition to the additional advisors in the Academic Services Center, we have developed a four-tiered advising model (pre-enrollment, freshmen advising, major advising, and career counseling). We utilize professional advisors, faculty advisors, and peer advisors, all working together. We also have created a system of Targeted Advising Cohorts, using a multivariate model of such measures as high school performance, family income, and ethnicity, to predict academic risk. Incoming students are placed in one of four advising quartiles, with interventions ranging from intensive tutoring and advising for the most at-risk quartile to simply monitoring progress of the students in the highest performing quartile.

One other major element of our Student Success Model will resonate with all the parents in the room today. It's our "Finish in Four" initiative. We advise students to take 15 credits a semester, promote summer school and wintersession classes, and remind students that every extra year in school costs them and their parents roughly \$75,000 in additional costs and delayed earnings.

Perhaps the biggest breakthrough we have had in developing our Student Success Model is our belief, from day one, that retention and student success is everyone's business on our campus. Consider this "Take-Away #3" today. Rather than creating a single office in charge of retention, the university has developed a number of different committees and work teams to support our Student Success Model. In this new institutional culture, faculty and student affairs staff work closely together, equally invested in the outcome.

Today, our faculty has a direct interest in and makes important contributions to student retention and timely graduation. Curriculum adjustments have improved retention and graduation, including the streamlining of programs so that students can graduate in four years, and the strategic offering of courses during intercessions. Academic departments also monitor their majors' retention, persistence and graduation rates closely and share the responsibility with student affairs staff to make sure that students are engaged, adjusting to college life, and using the full range of support services on campus to ensure their success.

Faculty members also have joined residence hall staff on the team of first responders in the university's "Academic Performance Notification System." When a professor has evidence that a student is not performing academically, one click of their computer sends an alert to a staff person in the advising center, as well as the student's academic advisor. Resident assistants in the dormitories are also part of this early warning system.

This collaboration between faculty, other academic support staff, and student services offices extends to another important component of our Student Success Model—the use of data to maximize student success. A common, easy-to-access data set related to student progress is now shared across departments, including admissions, financial aid, the Registrar's office, housing, information technology, planning/research, career services, and the Academic Services Center. Cross-functional work groups sit at the same table, discuss and analyze the data together, and make decisions as a team. This results in more timely interventions, better

outcomes, and more targeted support, and also produces unexpected discoveries. For instance, the key factor in predicting the success of freshmen, apart from all other measures, turns out to be whether or not they attend the library orientation program. Simply put, a student who is motivated to use the library from day one is more likely to be successful.

So far, I have focused on retention and student success strategies for students after they arrive on campus as freshmen. We also have programs for at-risk populations preceding their freshman year. Eastern has two pre-enrollment programs each summer for students who may not meet the University's standard entrance requirements--the Summer Proof of Ability Program, which offers students with marginal academic credentials an opportunity to demonstrate college potential, and the Summer Transition at Eastern Program/Contract Admissions Program, which provides intensive instruction in study skills and foundation academics to help low-income, first-generation and traditionally under-represented students transition from high school to college. Dozens of students, again primarily from low-income families, inner-city schools, and challenging, difficult circumstances, successfully enter bachelor's degree programs at Eastern each fall, following participation in one of these two programs.

The results we are seeing at Eastern in terms of retention, graduation rates, and student success are not simply due to the programming changes I have described. We have also worked very hard to foster a culture of community on our campus. Our culture—how we treat each other and the values we share—is as important at Eastern as the practices we have implemented.

On a small campus like ours, where staffing and financial resources are at a premium, working closely together is not only perhaps easier than on a larger campus, it is the only way we can get things done. On our campus, students, faculty, and staff also get to know each other personally. At Eastern, we see this sense of “family” and “community” as an opportunity for each member of the campus to invest in the whole, to reinforce the culture we have created for the benefit of students, faculty, and students.

A big part of our culture is our values of inclusion, diversity, and empowerment, values we have put into action. Eastern has the highest percentage of minority faculty in Connecticut; more than UCONN, more than Yale, more than Wesleyan; more than any other college or university in our state. That means that Hispanic students, African American students, and other minorities often see someone they can relate to at the head of the class. Those same faculty members serve as academic and club advisors, mentors, and role models outside of class. We also have similar diversity among our staff, especially in our residence halls and service areas. Not only has this been an asset in helping minority students transition and adapt to college life, our culture of diversity promotes a global perspective and values of inclusion and respect among all students.

This commitment to having a diverse faculty and staff does not happen by chance or occur overnight. My campus is in rural, northeast Connecticut. We have to work very hard—and we do—to find a diverse pool of candidates for faculty positions. Our search processes and our hiring practices reflect our realization that we are stronger for being diverse. Our faculty and staff hail from New England to New Zealand, from Ghana to Guyana, from Cuba to California, and other parts of the world.

Strategies to assist at-risk students in transitioning to college and overcoming academic, social, and other barriers. A collaborative, cross-functional approach to retention. An inclusive campus culture with a face that reflects the world. Those of some of the ways we are making a difference in the lives of Hispanics and other students from under-represented populations.

Now let me share Take Away #4 with you: Just as support systems that target at-risk students should be available and promoted to the entire campus, strategies that target high performing students can also benefit at-risk students. Indiana University Professor George Kuh describes an array of academic and campus engagement activities as being “high impact” practices—activities that not only thoroughly engage students, but also promote retention, persistence, and graduation. They range from internships to study abroad, undergraduate research, and student leadership opportunities. These high-impact practices are the hallmark of a liberal arts college, and we have found that first-generation and economically disadvantaged students also positively respond to such challenges and opportunities found on our liberal arts campus. They are intellectually challenged, and feel valued, perhaps for the first time. Let me give you a few examples.

CAMPUS LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES: At Eastern, we have discovered that engagement in student clubs and other campus activities—staying busy doing something of value—improves a student’s GPA and chances of graduation. Juggling classes, a job, and student leadership roles is actually a good thing. I have been gratified to see some of our strongest campus student leaders come from challenging and difficult, rather than privileged, backgrounds.

Let me tell you about one of these student leaders. His name is Todd Aviles. Todd came to Eastern Connecticut State University under a special program that I will speak more about in a few minutes. He grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, in a Puerto Rican family facing difficult circumstances. Todd’s parents got divorced when he was in the sixth grade, and his schoolwork took a tumble. As a sophomore in high school he failed five courses in a row. But he began to get himself back together as a junior and senior, and we took a chance with him at Eastern.

Todd joined one of our student clubs that focuses on developing leadership skills of male students while they perform community service in our town—and it energized him. He became vice president of the club as a sophomore and is now the club president. What Todd has done while leading his student peers is truly impressive. He worked with the director of our Center for Community Engagement to create a mentorship program in which Eastern students go into the local middle school and high school to work with bilingual students. I should mention that Willimantic has a Hispanic population that is more than three times the state average due to labor migration patterns reaching back to the 1950s.

As someone of Puerto Rican descent, Todd has demonstrated a big heart and a sharp mind in serving Hispanics and other schoolchildren in our community. But he hasn’t stopped there. During spring break, Todd has traveled to high schools in Connecticut and Massachusetts to encourage students of color to go to college. He has even created a program at his old high school in which he and other Eastern students from those Hartford neighborhoods go back home to remind younger students that there is a path out of the inner city for someone willing to work hard and take advantage of opportunities. Todd is a role model for everyone on our campus—students, faculty, and staff alike. And he is already mentoring freshmen and sophomore students of color and students from low-income families, so that they become the next wave of campus leaders after he graduates in another year.

I also should point out that minority students volunteer to work in our local community in larger numbers than their portion of our student population. At the same time that 21 percent of our students are minorities, 30 percent of students volunteering in the local community are minority students. Not only does that speak to their commitment to helping others, our data

reflects national statistics that show that performing community service, like participating in a student club, improves academic performance.

STUDY ABROAD: Another high impact practice that is usually reserved for students from more affluent backgrounds is studying abroad for a semester. I want to tell you the story of Orquidea Burgos and the life-changing experience she had two years ago in Florence, Italy. Orquidea graduated from Eastern in 2012 and will attend graduate school this coming fall in the field of child psychology. What makes her story special is where she has come from and how far she has come. Orquidea came to Connecticut from the Dominican Republic when she was 13, unable to speak a word of English. She spent three years in a bilingual program in high school when she arrived, and still struggles with the nuances of writing in a language other than her native Spanish. Orquidea came to Eastern in fall 2008 under the same program that brought Todd Aviles to our campus. During her freshman year, she took remedial classes at the local community college, but eventually enrolled full-time at Eastern and began to blossom. She interned at a local elementary school with a child psychologist, and found her calling. She also fulfilled a lifelong dream of studying abroad. Through our Foundation, we were able to provide her with financial support to attend a university in Florence for a semester in her junior year. Here is what she told me about her time in Italy:

“Studying in Florence, Italy, was the most amazing experience I have ever had in my life. I took five classes at the Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Italian International Institute; four classes related to my psychology major and a class in Italian. We also had time to travel to visit Venice, Rome, Pisa, Tuscany, Paris, and London. I am Catholic, so visiting the Vatican in Rome was an inspiration. My mom had said she always wanted to go there, so I called her on Skype and told her about all the things I saw. It was my way of sharing the experience with her. Visiting the mausoleum of Pope Paul II was truly special. I also visited St. Peter’s Square, St. Paul’s Basilica, the Statue of David, and the Colosseum. I threw a coin in Trevi Fountain. I also discovered that the churches in Italy are truly art treasures, and I enjoyed learning about their history. Even the bridges, like Ponte Vecchio in Florence, are works of art”.

Learning about global citizenship and acquiring a world perspective are experiences we want for all our students. When a young woman from the Dominican Republic comes to Eastern, gains skills and confidence, and watches the world open up before her to the point where she is now ready for graduate school, it makes me think that anything is possible.

INTERNSHIPS: Participating in an internship is another high impact practice that we want all our undergraduates to experience. More than 75 percent of our students take an internship, and others conduct undergraduate research or participate in a service learning course. This is in keeping with our tagline, which is “A Liberal Education. Practically Applied.”

Most internships are unpaid, including any internship for academic credit. When a student from a family living in poverty enrolls at our school, not only do they usually work in an on-campus job during the week and perhaps have a job in their home neighborhood on the weekends, many send some of the money they are making at their part-time job on campus home to help ends meet there.

Having the time to attend an off-campus internship—a job for credit but without earnings attached—is difficult, as is the issue of transportation. We are attempting to solve this problem by bringing internships—paid internships—on campus. We are finishing the second year of a project called the WorkHub, in which we are working with private sector companies to offer

students paid internships or co-ops in a facility on our campus. We have two clients at this point – CIGNA Insurance and Webster Bank—and expect more to follow, including both private and nonprofit sector organizations. We also have a graphic design studio in the WorkHub that works with corporate clients on their graphic communication needs.

The WorkHub not only offers students work experience and a decent paycheck without need to travel off campus, students in the internships are being hired by the companies after graduation. Although the WorkHub was not envisioned solely to support students from low-income backgrounds, a number of the students who have taken advantage of the program fall into that category. The key point is that we are seeking ways to extend high-impact practices such as internships to students who, in the past, have been hard-pressed to find the time and the means to participate.

So far, I have spoken about what we are doing on our campus to improve the retention and graduation rates of Hispanics and other students who come from economically disadvantaged homes, are first-generation college students, or otherwise do not have the role models and privileges afforded to other students. But the reality is, retention and student success on our campuses does not start when a student walks through our door as a freshman. This is Take-Away #5. Improving the chances of student success in college starts . . . when they are infants.

If we want more students of color, students from our inner cities, and students from low-income families to succeed in college—most of them without prior college students in their families to serve as role models—we cannot wait until they get to our campuses to support them. The data is clear that retention and college graduation rates are highly correlated to factors that start much earlier in life. How early?

As Americans, we hold certain “truths to be self-evident,” one being that “all men are created equal.” So reads our Declaration of Independence—perhaps the finest piece of political empowerment ever written. But what does science tell us?

Imagine a hospital nursery full of babies from all types of backgrounds—white babies, black babies, babies going home to mansions, and babies going home to inner-city tenements—but all healthy babies at birth. Data from the National Assessment of Education Progress tells us that at age nine months, all those babies will have the same level of motor skill development and mental acuity, regardless of ethnicity, the educational level of the mother, and whether or not she has a parenting partner. The data proves what our political principles proclaim: babies are indeed created equal.

That same NAEP data set, however, demonstrates the importance of privilege and opportunity. By age two, mental and motor skill performance is differentiated based on income, ethnicity and other socioeconomic factors. By age four, those differences in performance are even more pronounced. Once those babies grow up and go to school, the paths to prosperity or poverty—and their impact on academic performance—continue to diverge. NAEP data is gathered from every state of the Union, and it shows significant gaps in academic performance across our nation on reading, writing, math and science tests at the fourth, eighth and 12th grade levels, based on ethnicity, family income, and residence—urban students performing at lower levels than rural and suburban students. These gaps are not small—some represent two or more grade levels. And in many states—Connecticut being one of them—the gap between Hispanic and African American students, largely from low-income, urban neighborhoods and their white, more affluent counterparts grows larger as students move through school. Going to school makes the problem worse!

Hispanic students from low-income, urban families face an additional burden—that of learning a second language. National data indicates that a child who starts first grade in this country without English language proficiency is one grade behind the day they walk into school. That grows to two grade levels by the fifth grade.

Educators and policymakers have spent years trying to solve the poverty cycle in this country. The key is treating it as a systemic condition that a set of isolated social and economic factors. As Dr. Pedro Noguera, a sociology professor at New York University, wrote in 2010:

“Over the past 40 years, studies have shown that education policy must be devised in concert with health reform, poverty alleviation initiatives, and economic development in order to address the roots of failure in the most depressed areas. From crime and unemployment to teen pregnancy and even racism, education—or the lack thereof—is implicated in many of our nation’s social and economic problems. Education can be part of the solution to these and many other problems if reforms are designed and implemented in concert with key constituents—parents, teachers, local leaders and students—and with an understanding of how they must be coordinated with other aspects of social policy.”

Educational reform must be accompanied by other, broader social reform initiatives, if we truly want to see more students of color, first-generation, and low-income students attend and graduate from college. So what do we do? What can the people in this room do?

We can do nothing. Or we can wait until the students from our inner cities who actually graduate from high school find their way to our campuses and serve them when they arrive. We can also be part of a broader solution, doing what we can on our own campuses, while also reaching out to serve the larger community. In so doing, we not only can leverage our considerable resources in moving the bar on critical social issues facing our nation, we can engage our own students in the process, enriching their lives and providing learning opportunities they otherwise would not have. Let me give you a few examples of how we are doing this on my campus.

Early childhood education and literacy. Students and faculty in our Early Childhood Education program recently completed a three-year literacy project funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide literacy instruction to upwards of 600 local preschoolers and professional development to their teachers. Even though the grant is over, we intend to continue this program. We have learned that children must be literate in their native language in order to become literate in a second language—in Willimantic, that means Hispanic parents reading in Spanish to their preschoolers at home. It also means family and adult literacy programs to reinforce what is learned in school.

I explained earlier the significant Hispanic population in our community. Whether the children of those families come to college on our campus or go elsewhere doesn’t really matter. What matters is that we have the opportunity to make a difference in these children’s lives at a very young age. Whether it is providing direct service or conducting early childhood research, your campus should be finding ways to impact children when they need it the most.

Training bilingual teachers. How many of you have teacher preparation programs on your campus? Stand up! (I told you there would be an exercise component to my presentation!) The rest of you should stand up too and stretch your legs. Now, how many of you prepare bilingual teachers? Stay standing; the rest of you can sit back down. (To those still standing: Thank you for your important work. We need more bilingual teachers in our K12 schools if we want Hispanic and other ELL students to succeed in college. Again, thank you. You can sit down now.

In Connecticut, there are 35,000 English Language Learners in public K12 schools, a figure that grows 4-5 percent a year. Yet in the past eight years, the number of bilingual teachers declined 34 percent. My University is working with our local community college and the state Board of Education to prepare BA and MA candidates for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and bilingual endorsements. We need to do more of this in all 50 states.

Elementary, middle, and high school mentoring and tutoring. As universities and colleges, we have an opportunity to inject expertise into local K12 schools in the form of talented, dedicated student volunteers, guided and supported by faculty and staff. You may not draw a single student from the high schools near your college campus, but if each of us took it upon ourselves to partner with our local schools to support their students through organized tutoring and mentoring programs, we would help improve the academic performance, graduation rates, and college attendance rates of high school students across the country. In our own town of Willimantic, Connecticut, Eastern has more than 1,000 of our students tutoring or performing some other form of volunteer service in our local schools through our Center for Community Engagement.

These are not just education majors, by the way. Mathematics majors, for instance, have created a “Math Brigade” to provide math tutoring in the local middle school. Political science students have created and taught civics classes for fourth-grade students. Our performing arts students frequently put on plays at local schools or bring the students to our theatre for those performances. And our visual arts majors put on arts and cultural enrichment events throughout the year for elementary and middle school students. If your campus is doing similar programming, I applaud you. If you are thinking about it, let’s get started.

So there are things we can do on our campuses, things we can do out in our community. All of these ideas are that—mindful, research-based concepts and models that we can test and put into practice. On our campus, we conduct these activities as a strong, close-knit community grounded in shared values and a common mission. But I would tell you that all of the things we can do collectively are not as important as what we can do as individuals. Students of color, first-generation students, and students from our inner cities fight a host of factors that rob them of confidence and diminish their competence—everything from a lack of college graduates in their immediate families, to financial challenges to being the poorly prepared products of low-performing schools. Hispanic students may also face cultural and language barriers.

When these students come to our campuses, they are seeking to belong, seeking someone to trust, seeking a reassuring path in an unfamiliar place. That is where each of you can make a difference. On our campus these individuals have names like Kemeisha, Indira, LaQuana, Luis, Amelinda, Julisa, Dr. Letterman, and Mr. Diaz. I cannot bring them into your lives, but our students know them and have come to trust them and form lifelong friendships with them. Those very real people give students rides home to Hartford on Fridays—30 miles away; buy a meal when they can see someone has missed lunch; fill an eye glass prescription; and buy or loan books to a student short on cash. And they lift spirits when students need reassurance.

All of us in this room can think of someone similar in our past, who provided unanticipated counsel, guidance, or some other assistance at a time when we needed it. These people became our heroes, people who changed our lives, maybe even saved our lives, often without knowing it.

Let me tell you about one of my heroes — my freshman English professor, Dr. Morris McGee. Dr. McGee was a WWII and Korean War veteran who had been disabled in the Korean conflict, and was confined to a wheelchair. He was an alumnus of Montclair State College where

I went to college, a star football player, recipient of a Purple Heart, and a Shakespearean scholar. I didn't know it the first day I walked into class, but I was blessed to have Morris McGee for freshman English. I would not have made it through freshman year, let alone the rest of my college years and beyond had it not been for him.

I was the only minority person in the room. In fact, I never saw another Hispanic at Montclair State College. Professor McGee was very good, but I was intimidated in class. As someone whose native language was not English, I knew that my writing skills lacked polish and consistency. I was nervous and apprehensive. I never opened my mouth, never answered a question, and Professor McGee never called on me; I just sat there frozen.

Then it was time for the first writing assignment. I wrote an essay, and when I got it back and saw all the red ink on my paper, I knew I didn't belong in college. At the bottom of my paper, it said, "You need to see me in my office."

The next day I went to Professor McGee's office. When I arrived, he said, "Elsa, you are intelligent and you have a lot of potential but your writing is very, very poor. The only way you are going to get through this course is to come to my office every week and work on your revisions."

Thus began my supplemental instruction sessions with Professor McGee, a time when he taught me how to become a better writer. I spent hours in his office during my first semester rewriting my essays. Over time, my writing improved and I became more confident that I might actually be able to succeed as a college student. Throughout the semester, Dr. McGee continued to mentor me and encourage me. Without his steady hand and watchful eye, I have no doubt that my college days would have been short lived.

At the end of the course, I had a solid "B." I was the only minority student in a class of middle-class, privileged girls, a Puerto Rican immigrant whose native language was Spanish. And I had gained confidence that I could write at a college level.

Tonight, or tomorrow, or later this week, I want each of you think of someone like Dr. McGee in your life and reflect on the impact that person had on your success. This is the power each of us has to make a difference in one or more of our students—in a profound, life-changing way.

I told you earlier that both Todd and Orquidea came to Eastern through the same program. Let me tell you about it. The opportunities I have been given and the support I have received from people like Morris McGee inspired me to work with my colleagues at Eastern to start the Dual College Enrollment Program in 2008. The program offers the chance to attend college to a small cohort of students from Hartford Public High School, students who would not have met our standard entrance standards but who had some sparkle, some evidence of promise. In 2011, we expanded to Manchester High School, and this coming fall, we will expand to two more feeder schools in Hartford. In five years, we have enrolled more than 50 students in the program, and we have seen a transformation take place in most of them. Today, 80 percent of them have graduated or are on a path to graduate from Eastern, are enrolled at other colleges, or are in military service. I want to close today by sharing a video of the program with you so that you can hear on a personal level what it means when students from desperate neighborhoods are given the hope of a college education. . . .

I hope this video gave you a sense of the work being done on our campus to transform the lives of young people from our inner cities. They are truly an inspiration to me. I hope their story has been inspiring to you as well. Let me recap what I hope I am leaving you with today.

- Student success on our campuses is not about ethnicity; it is about giving students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds the tools to be successful.
- Retention on our campuses is everyone's business, and the strategies we use should benefit all students.
- At-risk students can gain confidence and skills by engaging in high impact practices traditionally left for higher performing students.
- Gather and analyze data to target services, improve student performance and assess and improve systems.
- Programming is important for retention success, but your campus culture is more important. How inclusive, diverse, welcoming, collaborative, and reaffirming is your campus?
- Encourage 1-1 mentoring. We make the biggest difference in a student's life, not through our collective behavior or our operational structures, but through individual acts of trust, caring and support.
- Work hard on your campus, but also reach out into your community. Not only will you contribute to solving the root causes of poverty, you will give your students learning opportunities that help build their social responsibility and citizenship skills.

That is my counsel and charge to you. What are the stakes? I know that everyone in this room is here because you believe in the power of education—to transform lives, to provide social and economic mobility, to ensure that our democracy is grounded in a strong middle class made up engaged, informed citizens actively participating in governing themselves. So I don't have to convince you of why we need to educate everyone in this great nation.

But let us raise the stakes a bit higher. At one time—little more than a decade ago—the United States had the highest percentage of adults with a college degree in the world. We were proud of that fact, because it was a measure of innovation, productivity and social stability. Today we are 13th among nations. At the same time, college attainment for Hispanics is only one-third that of Caucasians; the rate for African Americans is half that of Caucasians.

We are also told that by the end of this decade, two-thirds of all jobs in this nation will require some form of college degree. If we do not do a much better job at educating the growing population of Hispanics in this country, as well as students from other underrepresented populations, our economic future will be perilous, and the land of the free will be less so. So our task is both a moral and an economic imperative. The good news is that we have the power to meet that challenge. Let us also have the will.

Again, I am honored to have been able to be with you today. I hope that my experiences and the work being done at Eastern Connecticut State University, in some small way, can give ideas you can take back to your own campus. Good luck and God Bless on your own journey.