

Willimantic, Education

Eastern Welcomes Record Incoming Class After Years of Enrollment Decline

— Charlotte Harvey, 8.28.2026



Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic (Google Maps, 2026)

WILLIMANTIC — The largest incoming class in Eastern Connecticut State University's recorded history started its semester this week, offering a potential bright spot after years of declining enrollment.

This year's class consists of 1,146 first-year students, a 50% increase over the previous year. Fifty-four percent of the students are the first in their families to attend college.

Last year, Eastern's enrollment fell to its lowest level since 2018, continuing a pattern of steady enrollment decline since that time. The record-breaking incoming class has now given faculty and administrators to hope that trend may be reversing.

Eastern President Karim Ismaili told CT Examiner on Tuesday that the decision to invest in enrollment growth came from recognizing that the school had the capacity to admit more students while also leaning further into its mission as a public liberal arts university — a mission he said is resonating with students and families.

"We are all very happy to know that all of the work across campus has generated such interest in parents and students wanting to come here," Ismaili said.

He said the high percentage of first-generation students enrolling this year was particularly encouraging and showed that Eastern's investments in its academic programs and campus had paid off.

"The idea that I'm meeting students and they are more likely than not to be the first in their family to go to college is an incredible vote of trust in Eastern to be able to carry out that promise of higher education for them," he said.

Ismaili said the university has been preparing for over a year to welcome the larger class, with its first priority being to expand support services and resources to ensure students have a good first-year experience.

"The first thing we realized was that we needed to hire sort of individuals in wellness and advising. That was really important, so we made investments there," Ismaili said.

Benjamin Pauley, an English professor and former interim vice president for student success and enrollment, said much of the work over the past year

has been focused on taking a more proactive approach to recruiting students.

He said the traditional higher education model of waiting for students to find and choose a university is no longer tenable amid declining enrollment.

“We’re not just waiting for them to apply,” Pauley said. “We’re taking active steps to learn about who’s out there and try to make contact with them and help them understand that Eastern could be good for them.”

Over the past two years, admissions counselors have traveled more extensively to recruit students. Last year alone, counselors attended more than 700 events across Connecticut and beyond to promote Eastern, he said.

Cheryl Wilson, the vice president and provost of academic affairs, said the preparation involved not only convincing prospective students that Eastern was the right fit, but also ensuring the university would have the necessary academic resources to support them once they arrived.

One challenge, Pauley and Wilson said, was trying to accommodate so many first-year students with introductory classes.

Eastern has a 40-student cap for classes, with the average class size being about 20 students. With the larger incoming class, the university had to make more introductory classes available and create schedules that met students’ needs, school officials said.

“We just wanted to make sure that everything is ready to go and that the classroom and the class schedule as we look out across the next couple of years is ready to go as well,” Wilson said.

Total enrollment this semester is 3,850 students, up more than 400 from the year prior. Even so, Ismaili said he wasn’t concerned about the larger incoming class changing Eastern’s small-school feel and that there remains more room to grow.

In 2018, the school had 4,673 students, nearly 1,000 more than its current enrollment. Ismaili said Eastern’s maximum capacity was about 5,500

students.

This incoming class was a success story, though, for those who worked to recruit and prepare for record-breaking admissions, according to Ismaili. He also said the school would continue to move forward with this momentum.

“As I sit here, I want to build upon this,” Ismaili said. “This is a great moment of validation for everyone that was focused on building our class to know that all of the hard work that they did has brought these students to our campus so we can work with them and engage with them.”

“My biggest hope is that they have a really good smooth start to the semester, that they take advantage of the opportunities that are before them, that they think of this as an opportunity for them to develop, but also that they can think about how they can contribute to the world around them,” he added.



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