

Elsa M. Núñez Remarks
Women in Education Leadership Institute Dinner
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I want to thank Professor Deborah Jewell-Sherman and other members of the team at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who are putting on this institute and kindly asked me to speak with you this evening. Following the vision of former Dean Kathleen McCartney, this institute is truly advancing leadership among women in education. I am honored to be on the institute's faculty and hope I can provide some insights for you this evening. Before I begin, I want to congratulate all of the women in this room for the work you are doing every day in your K-12 districts and on your college campuses.

I had the opportunity to review some of the essays you had submitted in your applications. I was struck by two things. First, the skills you bring to the table are the very strengths that women have historically exhibited in our society—the ability to negotiate; teambuilding and collaboration skills; the ability to network and build relationships; the ability to meaningfully connect with individuals; emotional intelligence; empathetic and sympathetic skills; and the ability to communicate. Those are all critical leadership skills.

I was also struck by the issues you want to pursue at this institute and beyond—they closely align with my own experiences. What does it take to move from the faculty ranks to administration? How do you move up the ranks of administration? How can you stay in touch with students and classroom faculty as you move further into administration? How do you manage conflict? What can you do to develop leaders among your own employees? How do we address the educational needs of urban youth?

Clearly you have enough curriculum to work with in this institute, so I will not try to share big ideas, conceptual models, diagrams or charts with you tonight—certainly not after such a terrific dinner! But I think perhaps some of my own life experiences may provide you with ideas on how you might address some of your own leadership aspirations.

I was born in the mountain town of San Sebastián, Puerto Rico, in the northwest part of the island, home to coffee plantations and fruit and dairy farms. The oldest of three children, I spent the first eight years of my life there. It was a modest life — life in a very rural part of Puerto Rico. But I also vividly remember visiting my maternal grandmother—Ramona—in the slums of San Juan. Ramona was a single mother raising eight children in a wooden shack she built with her own hands in El Fanguito—“Little Mudhole”—a maze of homemade huts on stilts hovering over the tidal backwaters of San Juan Bay.

My grandmother had an ironclad will to survive . . . and her strength of character and determination to persevere has never left me.

My father was also industrious, and was determined to give my mother, my siblings and me a better life, so he decided to move us from Puerto Rico to the United States. When I was eight, my dad borrowed \$60 from a man to fly to New York, one of about 10 men from our town to make the flight, and the only one to repay the man who sponsored the trip. We ended up in Newark, New Jersey, one of the first Puerto Rican families there. My parents did not have a formal education, and my mother still has only a rudimentary grasp of the English language. When we arrived in Newark, no one in my family spoke English, so my dad and I would read the sports section in the newspaper and we picked up English together.

My memories of my childhood are full of stories of sacrifice . . . of the love and commitment to my brothers and me shown by my parents. My father pinched pennies so he could send me to the best Catholic girl's school in New Jersey. I remember the tattered coat he wore to church on Sundays to afford the tuition at my school, and I can remember my mother chastising him for wearing it. "I will die in this coat; the kids need to go to school," he would say.

I also remember the cultural obstacles we had to overcome. The nuns at my high school had no reference to relate to a Puerto Rican girl—I was one of the first in their school! I vividly remember the day that one of the nuns realized I might actually be capable of good work: "Elsa, I had no idea!" she said.

I worked hard in high school, and in my senior year — all on the same day — I learned that I had been accepted to Rutgers, Montclair State, and Middlebury College in Vermont.

When I got to school the next day, I was called to the office by Mother Superior. She said to me, "I want to know who your father knows." I didn't know what she meant. I said, "Sister, I don't understand what you're asking me." And then she made it clear; she was very angry that I had gotten into college when some of the other girls whom she had been cultivating did not. For me to get into Middlebury—a prestigious private college—was especially unnerving to her. She assumed we had connections, which is ironic to me today—**we literally had no connections!**

I have been fortunate over the years since — appointments as an Upward Bound instructor out of college led to a faculty appointment at Ramapo College and years later, faculty and administrative appointments in the City University of New York System. I received a fellowship from the New Jersey Department of Education and later, another fellowship from the American Council on Education.

All these formal and planned opportunities have been wonderful blessings, and I am grateful to the people who made them possible. These formal mentors and supporters have given me a bounty of knowledge and insight. But I also want to tell you about several examples of what I like to think of as "accidental" mentors, people who weren't intending on having a major impact on my life, but did so anyway.

The first "accidental mentor" I want to tell you about was my freshman English professor at Montclair State College — Dr. Morris McGee. He was a veteran who had been injured in the Korean conflict, and was confined to a wheelchair. He was a Montclair alumnus, a star football player in college, recipient of a Purple Heart, and a Shakespearean scholar. I didn't know it the first day I walked into class, but I was very fortunate to have him for freshman English.

At the beginning of the first class, Dr. McGee read everybody's name from the roster. He read names like Joe Schmitz, Maggie Johnson, and Cynthia Hawkins, and then when he got to my name, he said with the intonation of someone familiar with the Spanish language, "Elsa Maria Núñez, what a beautiful name."

For the first time, I heard my name spoken like that by an American, by a non-Spanish speaker. Dr. McGee, of course, was trying to make me comfortable. But I was **uncomfortable** because everybody looked around and it was obvious it was me; I was the only minority person in the room. In fact, I never saw another Latino at Montclair State.

Professor McGee was very good, but I was intimidated in class. The other students could all answer the questions. They were very sophisticated. They were smart and I was daunted. Then it was time for our first writing assignment.

I wrote an essay, and when I got it back and saw all the red marks on my paper, I knew I did not belong in college. At the end, it said, “You need to see me in my office.” I read that and I thought, “Oh my God; I am going to flunk out!”

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 during my first semester in college, rewriting my essays in his office. While I was making corrections, Dr. McGee would either be reading a book or correcting papers or writing something himself.

I would rewrite the sentences, a paragraph or two at a time, and then he would look up and say, “Are you ready?” He would read what I wrote, comment on it and make me do it again.

Over time, my writing improved and I became more confident that I might actually be able to succeed as a college student. At the end of the course, I had a solid “B,” and I was happy to get that grade. I was the only minority student in a class of middle-class, privileged girls, an immigrant whose native language was Spanish. And I had gained confidence that I could write at the college level. We all should be blessed with accidental mentors like Morris McGee!

My second example of an accidental mentor was my English Department chair at Ramapo College in New Jersey, where I began my faculty teaching career.— Robert Christopher, the chair of the department, was a little “laid back,” so he wanted to push some of his work off on someone—the tasks senior faculty abhor like room scheduling, ordering textbooks, and dealing with student complaints. He chose me! Although it was extra work, I now really he was encouraging me to think beyond the classroom to the possibilities of advancing to a career in administration. I really doubt I would be here today if Bob hadn’t pushed me in this direction early on during my time as an instructor. He was my second accidental mentor!

I am sure you can also think of someone in your own lives who served as an “accidental mentor” — someone who was in the right place at the right time to counsel and support you. Perhaps you are someone else’s accidental mentor today!

I have my own accidental mentees, and I was reminded of an informal, unplanned relationship again this week. Patricia Garcia is the superintendent of schools in Willimantic, Connecticut, where my campus is located. We met early on in her administration, and she would begin calling me to elicit advice. She would describe a situation happening on the school board or in one of schools, and ask me for my ideas. More often than not, I have simply helped her reaffirm and support the decisions she had already been considering. I was her accidental mentor. What our mentees need from us change with the circumstances, but the key is that we are there for them.

Being there for our students and our faculty . . . how simple a commitment to describe, how challenging an investment it can be! Usually we are just there to listen, but there are times we must also educate and counsel.

One of the most difficult challenges we face as leaders are those moments when we must be decisive even when our decisions will not be universally applauded. Disciplining a student, firing an employee, cutting budgets—those are tough decisions to make, and women who aspire to be educational leaders must learn to trust themselves in making them. I think everyone we

work with understands the need to be tough, but **tough** is not **mean**. The way to gain approval for those tough decisions is to be known for consistently being **fair**.

Let me close by sharing one other important lesson that I have learned over the years. As a university president, I am called upon to speak on a variety of issues. Sometimes I have the pleasure of speaking to a distinguished audience like this evening. Sometimes I have to give testimony before a legislative committee. I also frequently have to speak to my own staff, faculty and students about initiatives on our campus. What I have learned is how important it is to “walk the talk.”

The late author and leadership development guru Steven Covey had a wonderful way of defining “walking the talk,” which in his mind was a euphemism for the word “integrity.” In his book on “Principle-Centered Leadership,” Dr. Covey stressed the importance of living a principle-centered life, conducting our daily existence based on a fundamental set of beliefs uncompromised by the circumstances of the day.

The first layer of integrity, in Dr. Covey’s view, is to align our thoughts with our principles—“think what you feel.” It naturally follows that what we say should align with our thoughts—“say what you think.” The last layer of alignment is to be sure that our actions align with our statements—“do what you say.” Integrity is thus the alignment of our actions, statements, thoughts, and beliefs. This is a concept easy to articulate and put up on the screen, but it is not so easy to pull off. Nonetheless, it is a marvelous model for living a dignified human life.

And if we truly believe in our core set of principles, they surely should be reflected in our thoughts, the things that we say, and the actions we take.

We can find integrity at all levels of our organizations, but the fact is, leaders by definition are the most visible people in any organization. People expect their leaders to be honest, to be ethical, to have integrity. When I arrived on the campus of Eastern Connecticut State University 10 years ago, I had two immediate opportunities to meet this test of my leadership.

First, we were embarking on a major update of our strategic plan. I made sure that our entire campus was involved, and everyone appreciated the openness, transparency, and inclusive nature of the process. But everyone also wanted to see results. One thing that we did was to codify our Core Values. It wasn’t that we had no values or principles in previous administrations.

I would tell you that the values held dear by our faculty, students, emeriti, and alumni today have been in our people’s hearts and minds for generations. But we had not gone through the exercise of confirming and articulating those values. It was an important task and I think the process of validating these core values across the campus helped ensure that they would not simply be words written on a page and forgotten. Our core values are:

- *ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE*
- *ENGAGEMENT*
- *INCLUSION*
- *INTEGRITY*
- *EMPOWERMENT*
- *SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY*

You can see that integrity is one of our core values. When I started at Eastern 10 years ago, I realized if I was to give that word any meaning on our campus, I needed to make sure that the other values were not simply given lip service.

As an educational institution, we have had decades of focus on our academic excellence, and I like to think that we naturally empower and engage our students in their learning as a function of being a small liberal arts campus. Eastern also has a long history of serving our local community and teaching social responsibility to students.

However, given the changing demographics in our society and on our campuses, the core value I felt we needed to address more proactively was “Inclusion.” It was not simply a matter of recruiting more first-generation, minority, and low-income students. We needed to ensure our campus was welcoming and supportive, so that those students would persist and graduate.

One thing I have focused on is hiring a more diverse faculty—it is important for students of color to see someone they can relate to at the head of the classroom. I am very proud that today, Eastern has the highest percentage of minority faculty of any college or university in Connecticut, including UCONN, Wesleyan, and Yale.

We also have benefited from several major grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to improve our advising, tutoring, and other academic support services. While these services support all students, they were designed to focus on the needs of at-risk populations, defined as first-generation students, students from low-income families, and students of color.

Eight years after we first received those grants, our overall graduation rate has steadily improved. In addition, I am delighted to tell you that for one of those targeted cohorts — Hispanic students — Eastern has seen the largest improvement in graduation rates of any public institution in the nation, according to The Education Trust.

Such data is always gratifying, but I believe success should also be measured at the micro level — how are we impacting individual students in their personal journeys? And where can we find students who are most in need?

This was the second test of my leadership and the task of “walking the talk.” It is easy to talk about the importance of diversity on college campuses. How could we put together a successful program to promote access and success among students from the most depressed neighborhoods? I knew it would take time and money. It wouldn’t be glamorous, and it couldn’t be done on a large scale.

We understood that you save the lives of young people from the inner city one soul at a time. But I was determined to increase the number of minority students attending Eastern, while improving their completion rates once they arrived.

In 2007, I personally visited two counselors at Hartford Public High School, located in the west end of Hartford. Two-thirds of the students at the school are Latino, one-third are African American, and there is a smattering of Caucasians. Ninety percent of the children at the school are living below the poverty line. This was where the battle for survival was being waged.

The counselors at the high school assured me that they could find a small cohort (10-12 seniors a year) who might not have the academic qualifications to meet our normal entrance requirements or have any intention of attending college, but who had spark, motivation and the potential to succeed with sufficient support.

I then convinced the president at Quinnebaug Valley Community College — our local community college — to partner with me to provide remedial coursework in the first semester of

these students' programs so they would be ready to hit the ground running on my campus by their second semester.

In fall 2008, we started the "Dual College Initiative," with the students living on my campus, taking one course at Eastern and 3-4 remedial courses at the community college. They are given work-study jobs on our campus, and encouraged to immerse themselves in campus life. We also make sure that these students take full advantage of all the student support services available to all students—our peer tutor program; supplemental instruction in math, reading, and writing; professional advisors; financial aid; and mentors. It sounds like a well-thought out program, but we have had our share of growing pains and "A-ha!" moments.

I am so proud of the faculty and staff on my campus who have gone the extra mile to give each of the more than 100 students who have moved through this program the personal attention they needed to succeed. And I am grateful for the financial support we have received from all points on the compass—from the WalMart Foundation; from the U.S. Department of Justice; from local foundations and other generous donors.

Keep in mind the students we are seeing in this program come from violent neighborhoods and broken families, without any college graduates in their families to serve as role models. Many of the students are first-generation immigrants—learning to speak English was just one of many challenges they have faced in coming to this country. So for me to tell you that the program's graduation rate is far above the figure for students graduating from Hartford Public High School is astounding.

For me to tell you that we now have graduates of the program in master's degree programs in clinical psychology, social work, and counseling is astounding. For me to describe other graduates working as family health outreach coordinators, human services specialists and cultural center directors at the University of Connecticut is astounding! Let me show you a brief video that allows some of these special students to tell their story in their own words. (**Dual College video**)

More and more of our campuses are led by women. More women are graduating from our schools to lead major corporations, join the medical staffs at hospitals, make news as scientists, and continue to break down barriers, walls, glass ceilings, and other impediments to progress. Those women are not the only beneficiaries of this progress—our entire society benefits when women are encouraged and supported in fulfilling their dreams and their potential.

In eight short months from now, a woman could very well be elected the next president of the United States. Politics aside, isn't it about time! And with the work of leadership development programs like this institute, who knows what awaits us in the future! Again, thank you so much for having me, and best wishes for continued success!