

President Núñez
“THE STRENGTH TO SUCCEED”
State of the University Address
August 25, 2015

Good morning! It is wonderful to see everyone here as we kick off the academic year. With classes starting next Monday, I know how busy you are today and how busy the rest of this week will be. Thank you for taking time to be here.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I would like to welcome our new faculty and staff to campus. We have 25 new colleagues with us this fall. Would all of the new faculty and staff stand up one more time?

We are very pleased that you have joined this community, and we want you to feel welcomed. I hope each of you finds challenges and rewards in your new role and soon feels at home at Eastern.

Each year at this meeting I give the State of the University address. So how are we doing? The short answer is – Eastern is doing very well. We continue to receive regional and national awards and recognition, we continue to see a variety of metrics on the up-tick, and our budget—despite state funding challenges, demographic trends and other realities—appears to be sufficient for us to operate in the black once again. Thanks to our collective resourcefulness in managing limited, if not diminishing financial resources, we are in reasonably good shape, and have the capacity to do some great things this year. **We have the strength to succeed.** Now let me fill in the details for you.

I want to begin by sharing two wonderful pieces of news. Since both are matters of public record, you probably know about them. Nonetheless, let me share these with all of you. First of all, the Princeton Review again recognized Eastern as one of the Top Colleges in the Northeast — there are eleven states in the region.

The quality of our academic enterprise continues to be respected and acknowledged, and it is this academic reputation that will be our calling card to a prosperous future as a thriving public liberal arts university.

Secondly, after taking 2014 off from workplace surveys, we returned to participate in the annual Great Colleges to Work For Program, sponsored by the Chronicle of Higher Education. And for the sixth time, we were named a Great College to Work For. (Unfurl the banner; applause)

Most significantly, and for the first time, we made the Great Colleges “Honor Roll,” one of only forty-two schools in the country. We were the only four-year institution in Connecticut to receive “Great Colleges” recognition, and the only public four-year institution in New England.

We also were cited in 9 of the 12 criteria for organizational excellence in the Great Colleges program. This is the highest number of exemplary categories we have ever achieved in the Great Colleges program, and it speaks to our continued growth and maturity as an organization.

Some of the criteria, such as compensation, are out of our control. Others, however, speak to our strengths as a unified body of professionals who work together to accomplish shared goals and aspirations. Collaborative Governance. Confidence in Senior Leadership. Job Satisfaction. Relationships between employees and their supervisors. Professional Development. That is a profile that speaks to a strong organization of powerful people. And keep in mind, this wasn't a questionnaire filled out by the President. This was a confidential survey administered across our workforce by an independent contractor.

It speaks volumes for how we conduct ourselves, how we work together, and our capacity to solve problems, meet goals, and respond to challenges.

I thank all of you who participated in the survey, and I congratulate you for being members of this high performance team! **We have the collective strength to succeed.**

Awards and recognitions are always nice to receive, and certainly we love to see our name in print. But to me, the real message of such recognitions is that Eastern is a strong organization, a community of people who work together, have each other's back, and focus on meeting common goals. It is also about our capacity to deal with the changes that are occurring around us. Let me mention some of the other recognitions we have received over the past year; they also come with a special message.

- Earlier this year, the Carnegie Foundation gave us their coveted Community Engagement Classification.
- For the fifth time in six years, we were named to President Obama's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.
- The Institute for Sustainable Energy received the Energy STAR award from the U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency.
- The U.S. Green Building Council and the Princeton Review named Eastern one of the nation's green colleges for the sixth straight year.
- U.S. News and World Report rated Eastern as the ninth top public university in the North serving veterans.
- We will hear next month where we rank in the annual overall U.S. News rankings, but a year ago, we were again ranked in the top 30 public universities in the North, a region that stretches from Maine to Maryland and west to Pennsylvania.

- And our students are excelling in national competitions. We have represented Connecticut four of the nine years that our state has sent a student to the Posters on the Hill Conference in Washington, DC; no other public institution in Connecticut has had a single student attend in that time. Last spring in Washington State, 14 students presented at the National Council on Undergraduate Research Conference, by far the most of any Connecticut school, and second only to Truman State in COPLAC. Undergraduate research—a key indicator of academic rigor and engagement at a liberal arts college—is alive and well at Eastern.

I said these distinctions, like our Great Colleges to Work For designation, have a special message. Isn't it interesting that Eastern is receiving recognition for excellence in many of the areas that we are focusing on in our strategic plan—academic rigor and quality; student engagement in the community; sustainability; a strong workforce.

We are being recognized for making progress on the things we care about. That means we are focused on the right issues . . . and that we are succeeding. Well done Eastern!

We clearly have the will and the competence to continue to stretch ourselves in pursuit of our vision to be one of America's distinguished public liberal arts colleges. How about capacity? Do we have the resources—human and financial—that we need to do our work? All of us know of open positions that, if filled, would help us do a better job of serving students, while taking some of the load off of the people who ARE here.

And we know that we could always find a use for any additional funds that the state legislature, generous donors, or other funding sources might send our way. But I don't want to waste your time talking about what we don't have. Let me tell you what resources we DO have this coming year.

- First of all, **we have each other** — our biggest asset. Through your diligence, sacrifice, ingenuity, and hard work, we have been able to balance our budget the past six years, and we are on track to do so again. Through their professional attitudes, approach, and actions, our people have consistently found ways to have a positive impact on our students and our state, managing to do this with increasingly limited resources.
- We do need to continue the same prudent financial management practices we have been abiding by for years—saving money when we can, reallocating resources when it makes sense, deferring expenses when possible. I continue to count my blessings that I have people like Jim Howarth and Karyl Bulmer to mind the store at Eastern!

As I said to start my remarks, I always deliver the State of the University Address at this first University Meeting of the year. In addition to all the recognitions we have received, I want to give you an update on some operational issues.

- Let me begin by sharing the latest news on this year's budget. I gave you an extensive review of our budget back in May, because of state budget changes, so I will limit my comments today to new developments.
- Recall that the Board or Regents initially forecast a \$48 million shortfall in funding for the state colleges and universities. The 8 percent tuition increase that the Board of Regents approved reduced the statewide shortfall to \$22 million, and we anticipated the impact on Eastern at \$3.3 million. I told you in May that we would manage that shortfall by holding open 28 positions.
- Since May, legislative add-backs have reduced the system-wide deficit to \$20 million. The difference is such that we are going to continue to be cautious in our approach, holding the line on expenses and holding many positions open for now.
- The good news is that we can maintain current staffing, pay for contractual raises, and cover fringe benefit increases. We can also maintain operating expense budgets at last year's levels.
- One challenge will be the additional maintenance and utility costs associated with opening the Fine Arts Center this coming January. I am challenged by these needs.
- Again, it will be another tight budget year, but I think we will be able to operate in the black again, accomplish our objectives, and fulfill our vision.

I mentioned the state budget and the State College and University System, and I am sure many of you are wondering about recent events occurring at the Board of Regents. If you follow the news media, you know that Board of Regents President Gregory Gray tendered his resignation on August 14, effective the end of this year.

The Board has appointed Mark Ojakian, former chief of staff for Governor Malloy, as interim president, so that we can continue to serve the state of Connecticut and the thousands of students on our 17 campuses.

I intend to work closely with the Board, the President, and his staff in my dual roles as your president and as the Board of Regents Vice President for the State Universities, to ensure that our students and our institutions continue to move forward, and that we have stability locally.

One aspect of our work as a member of the state system is the Transform 2020 Initiative. This past spring, following a series of events that made clear faculty and staff on the 17 Connecticut State College and University campuses felt they had not been sufficiently consulted on Transform 2020, Dr. Gray asked each campus president to convene a process for evaluating the initiative, gain campus input, and report back to the Board of Regents.

To that end, this morning I sent out an email to our campus community, indicating that COFE2 will establish a subcommittee to review Transform 2020, with recommendations due back to me this fall. I called it the “Vision Committee.” I will then share those recommendations with the Board of Regents, as we work to take the best ideas contained within the Transform 2020 program and move them forward.

In advance of that process, I want to thank Pat Banach for being our dedicated campus liaison to the Transform project. I am also very grateful to Ross Koning, who has agreed to chair the Vision Committee, and want to thank each committee member for agreeing to serve in this important role.

I also think it is important to note how proactive Eastern has been in responding to and aligning our own work with the Board of Regent’s Strategic Goals.

There is a Board of Regents document that was put together almost a year ago for the Board of Regents Town Hall Meeting held at Eastern last fall. It is still useful in illustrating the alignment of Eastern’s work and the Board of Regents’ blueprint for the future, and I have included a link to it in the memo I sent you this morning.

Let me mention just a few examples of how Eastern is providing leadership at the state level in response to specific Transform Clusters or groups of objectives.

- **Attracting Students:** We have expanded services to adult students, especially veterans, while continuing to attract traditional students
- **Enhance Academic Offerings:** We hired additional full-time faculty, launched five new majors, and modified our graduate programs.
- **Transfer and Articulation:** Eastern served as the sole state university in the just-concluded Health and Life Sciences initiative involving five community colleges.
- **Revenue Management:** On the recruitment side, we expanded the New England Regional Student Program and, on the academic front, are reallocating resources using the Exemplary Program Review process.

The link that I shared this morning has many more examples of how Eastern is showing leadership in addressing the Strategic Goals of the Board of Regents, and I encourage you to take time to review it in detail.

One more thing about our budget. In addition to some positive movement in support we are receiving from the state, there is another big reason why this year's budget is in relatively good shape—our enrollment is up!

A year ago, I reported to you major concerns about enrollment at Eastern. Not only were our numbers down—students we depend on for tuition, housing, and food service revenues—the trends we were confronting put our future at risk. Demographers told us that Connecticut's high school graduating classes will shrink by 18 percent over the next 10 years. Every other institution of higher education in the Northeast is facing that same demographic trend, and a year ago, we began to see a new, unparalleled wave of marketing by other colleges and universities.

The University of Connecticut set an aggressive enrollment goal of 6,500 new students over the next decade, and put its resources in motion to achieve that goal. We saw schools from New Jersey advertising in the Hartford Courant. We saw schools from New Hampshire on local cable channels. And we ran into our colleagues from Western recruiting in Long Island to try to offset their own decline in in-state enrollments.

With our enrollments down last fall, I asked everyone in this room to think of ways to turn our enrollment picture around. How did you respond? Like “Those Who are Eastern” always do — with quiet determination, innovation, and teamwork. Here is what was accomplished.

- Through the hard work and diligence of the faculty, we launched five new majors last fall. Today, we have more than 500 new students in those five majors.
- Our academic departments worked with the Office of Admissions so that faculty could communicate earlier with prospective students. With new software and other systems in the works, this effort will be greatly enhanced over the next few years.
- We used a targeted strategy to leverage financial aid so that we could continue to support students with unmet need while also attracting students who otherwise might go elsewhere.
- We went “test optional,” following the footsteps of dozens of other schools, and the result was a substantial increase in applications. Even so, the average SAT score of our registered freshmen is up 32 points!
- Our admissions staff redoubled their recruiting efforts, focusing on increasing out-of-state enrollments.
- Those efforts paid off! Let me share our fall 2015 enrollment figures with you; these are from the latest Eastern and Board of Regents reports.
- We are the only Connecticut State University with an increase in full-time enrollments

- We have an overall enrollment increase of 3.6 percent
- We had an 11 percent increase in applications
- Overall tuition deposits are up 13 percent
- Out-of-state deposits are up 85%; deposits from students enrolled under the discount program for New England residents are up 27%; and international deposits are up 22%
- Registrations for new full-time students are up 11%; part-time enrollments are up 29%

With a state funding allocation that hovers around 35 percent, we depend on student tuition and other student-generated revenue to pay our bills, make our payroll, and run our daily operations. To everyone—and I suspect it’s fair to say that means everyone here—who helped turn our enrollment picture around, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Let me pause for a second. Let’s take a deep, collective breath and review what I have told you so far this morning. We continue to receive good grades for our work. We continue to see progress in meeting the goals we have established as a team. Our students are doing well when they compete against students from other schools. Our metrics are up, and our fall enrollment looks good again.

We should feel good about where we are. We should also feel good about our ability to respond to challenges.

And that is a good thing, because I am about to share **this year’s challenge** with you. While we must continue to battle demographic and financial forces to ensure that this year’s uptick in enrollment continues, I have a challenge for all of us. **This year, we need to focus on retaining the students who are here.** Improving retention rates has been one of our strategic plan’s major measuring sticks, and we have done a very good job at it; we still need to do better, and here is why.

With a smaller than usual freshman class last fall, we now have a smaller sophomore class than normal. So while we have a great freshman class this fall, the number of returning students is down four percent. To stay even, let alone see robust overall enrollment figures, we need to improve our retention efforts even more.

Improving retention also has reputation implications. It is one of the criteria used by U.S. News and World Report in its rankings. And when you see some other COPLAC schools with retention rates 10-15 points higher than Eastern, you know we have room to improve.

Let me acknowledge that we certainly have worked hard on retention over the past 6-7 years, and the signs of progress and improvements are real.

- Retention has actually improved across the board at Eastern over the past 15 years—we have ticked up about eight points on each of the one-, two- and three-year retention figures over that time.
- Our two Strategic Plans since 2008 have attempted to continue that momentum, and the COFE Committee has made it a top priority.
- We created the Targeted Advising Cohort system and now use predictive modeling to analyze what factors best predict student success and what interventions best impact at-risk students.
- This model has paid off, with GPAs from 2011-13 improving across all four TAC cohorts, and minority students showing retention figures that are above our overall average.
- The Academic Services Center continues to provide important support services to students. More than 2,000 students visit the center each year, logging more than 10,000 visits. I want to thank all the people of Eastern at the ASC Center for all they do for our students!
- We instituted a multi-tiered advising system so that students meet with both faculty and professional advisors.
- We created an early warning system that shares signs of at-risk behavior and performance with faculty, residence hall staff, advisors, and other staff.
- We improved scheduling to help students graduate in four years, and now mandate that each student develops a four-year academic plan.
- And just yesterday, funded by a Davis Foundation grant, faculty from all our academic departments convened with the deans and Mr. Bisese for a half-day workshop on how to increase retention and graduation rates. They will have another workshop in September. We are serious about retention!

While all of these efforts are intended to support all our students, they especially target students who are at greater risk academically. We will continue those efforts, and with SAT scores of entering freshman at an all-time high, we will have more students entering this fall with lower risk of withdrawing for academic reasons.

There appears to be two other major variables that impact retention. The first is financial—students drop out if they cannot afford to continue; it is that simple.

We are addressing that as well. The ECSU Foundation continues to work closely with our Financial Aid Office and Admissions Office to find ways to attract higher performing students while also supporting students whose financial situations put their retention and graduation at risk. Some measures of progress include:

- This past year, total giving to the Foundation exceeded \$2 million

- The ECSU Foundation made \$750,000 available for scholarships to approximately 325 deserving students, an all-time high
- The Foundation and Financial Aid Office are working together to ensure four years of support to students so that they can complete their educational goals.
- Merit scholarships are being leveraged to increase the number of entering students with higher academic performance in high school. 530 students received \$1.4 million in non-need based aid this past year!
- We will also see an increase in the amount of CSU Grants to support students with unmet financial need.
- We increased need-based aid by 18% and increased the number of students receiving it by 7%.
- We increased non-need based aid by 37 percent, and the number of students receiving it grew 33%.

The other critical factor that we need to address, and the one I want to focus on today, is the high incidence of students enrolling at Eastern as freshmen with the intention of transferring. Too many students are coming to Eastern with an eye over their shoulder and one foot already back out the door. What these students say they want, and what they think they need is “a bigger school,” one with a higher national profile.

Somehow they think the institutional reputation and profile of a larger school will translate into personal success. It certainly is no guarantee. We know that. We believe—I dare say we can prove it—that a smaller campus where students can get to know their professors, conduct research and other scholarly pursuits as undergraduates, and become campus leaders, is a better learning environment for most students.

When a student tells us, “I don’t intend to stay at Eastern; I want to go to a bigger school,” our response should be that they need to spend more time making their decision. The fact is, the best private liberal arts colleges—and we have many of them in New England—mimic our size. They feature personal interactions between faculty and students, a welcoming learning environment, and outstanding academic reputations.

Assuming students recognize the value of attending such elite private institutions—schools that look more like Eastern than not—we need to ask students seeking a “bigger” experience if they truly understand the value of being on a smaller, not larger campus. If they are serious students, I believe we can help them realize leaving Eastern for a larger school is a mistake.

We need to sell our campus to every student who arrives here. Our advocacy for the education taught on this campus cannot end once students enter as freshmen.

In the world of retail, there are formulas to show the value of existing customers. In our world of higher education, we have similar metrics. Not only is the retention of each student who comes here a component of the measures used by the Board of Regents to evaluate Eastern, it is also a factor in the U.S. News and World Report ratings. More importantly, if we believe in what we do here, then we can all agree that keeping a student at Eastern for their entire undergraduate career is best for them. We need to be more vocal in talking up Eastern to the students who are already here. I am asking you to develop plans for how to do that.

I also think we need to leverage the competitive advantage we have over every other public university in Connecticut — **our personal commitment to students** — to turn around the wandering eyes of some students.

One of our upcoming advertising themes — you will see it on billboards and other ads — is “Where You Won’t Get Lost in a Crowd.”

Our smaller scale is our strength. It allows us to give students personal attention. It gives each of them opportunities to explore their interests and realize their potential. We don’t want students to get lost... we want to help them discover themselves.

My charge to each of us is this — we need to proactively reach out to each freshman as they begin their time at Eastern. Maybe that means faculty taking students out to lunch. Maybe it means having coffee with them and talking about their academic goals. Perhaps it’s loaning them a book that speaks to one of their personal interests. Or maybe it is simply taking a moment to check in with a student—ask them how they are doing, and help them if they need assistance.

I don’t want to tell you how to leverage your own role at Eastern to impact students on a personal level. But I will stand by the following statement: When someone at Eastern shows interest in a student — as an individual with promise, as a real person — and that interest helps a student blossom and prosper, that mentor becomes a friend for life, and that student will graduate from Eastern.

So that is my challenge. We know that Eastern is the best educational setting for the majority of students who show up at our door. Let’s not wait until they are juniors and seniors to let them know we think they are special, and that Eastern WAS the right choice.

Ask yourself, how can I and my colleagues make our current students fully appreciate the value of staying at Eastern their full four years? How can we make what we know to be a personalized experience on this campus even more special?

What about your academic department can you showcase to your majors so that they are proud to be part of your program and take full advantage of their four years while they are here? How can we as a campus culture, remind all of our students — on a daily basis — of the special place we call Eastern and those who make up this community?

Invite a student to visit you in your office. Take them to lunch. Get involved with a student club. Sponsor a housing theme. Establish a relationship. Invest in their future. Because in the end, students who dream of a bigger arena aren't looking for the limelight. They want to belong to something. At Eastern, we offer students the opportunity to be part of something special, without losing their own identity. No student should ever be "lost in the crowd" at Eastern! We say our campus community is personable. Let us make this campus irresistible!

Let me leave you with one other thought. As many of you know, I recharge my own "batteries" each summer by taking a special vacation with my husband. Over the years, we have been to 43 countries, including China, all the Baltic States, Turkey, parts of Africa, and this summer—Panama and Peru. My husband plans the trips, and let's just say we are not typical tourists. We don't follow the usual trails or see the standard tourist sites. We end up seeing a deeper cut of the local culture and environs than most people, and I always come home with unexpected discoveries and insights—not just about the places we visit, but also about Americans and people in general.

We spent the past few weeks in Panama and then at the Incan ruins of Cusco and Machu Picchu in Peru. These are very different locales—one a link between the east and west and the other a historical reminder of a once thriving empire — but I was struck by three themes that kept reverberating back at me in both places.

First of all, I was struck by what people can do when they are unified in their commitment to meeting a goal. Secondly, I was in awe of the endless heights to which men dream. Finally, I was amazed by what people are able to accomplish with the tools of their time.

The Panama Canal is truly an accomplishment on a global scale. It took almost 10 years to build and cost thousands of workers their lives in the process. Today, more than 14,000 ships move through its locks each year, and more than a million ships have been through the canal since it opened in 1914. We turned over the Canal to Panama in 1976, but it was not until 1998 that the agreement was fully realized.

The process of raising ships 85 feet from sea level during the 8-hour crossing was the engineering feat of its time, allowing ships to cut 8,000 miles off their journey. That means eight billion miles saved since the canal opened!

We also went to Machu Picchu, which was built almost 600 years ago. It was the mountain-top estate of the Inca ruler at the time. It is 8,000 feet above sea level, and the dominant symbol of the Inca Empire. Over a short period of less than 400 years, the Incas built the largest pre-Columbia empire in the Western Hemisphere.

Taking in portions of what are now Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile, Inca-controlled territories exceeded the size of all the countries from the Rio Grande to the Panama Canal.

Their administrative, military and political systems were impressive, and while they imposed their Quechua language on the tribes they ruled, local cultures and religions were allowed to flourish. The Incas were an amazing people who were dedicated to the land they loved.

I wish you could have been with me to see the Inca stonework at Machu Picchu. Their masons were so good at their work—without modern tools mind you—that the buildings they constructed from stone block needed no mortar, yet you couldn't slide a blade of grass between the blocks.

This trip was so important to me — not simply as a way to get away and relax — but also as a way to remember why I am here at Eastern. Sometimes we have to put distance between us and our daily lives to really tune into who we are and what we need.

When I arrived at Eastern more than nine years ago, I had a visceral sense that I was in the right place. I had taught at a public liberal arts college. This community felt right to me. I knew I belonged here. And I still do.

I have to thank my father for reminding me of this essential truth. I had brought him back a baseball cap from our trip, with “Panama Canal” on the front, and I cannot tell you how big a deal that was to him.

It is his pride and joy and he has worn it every day since I gave it to him. You see, he was stationed in the Panama Canal during World War II, and recalls his time there with great fondness—he loved the people there! He felt they were such hard working people. They made enormous sacrifices in the building of the canal 100 years ago—many lives were lost, and it wasn't until 1998 that Panama finally had the Canal given over to them. After being taken advantage of for most of a century—all in the name of capitalism and progress—Panama is now prospering from the Canal built through their own country.

My father always worked hard for our family during his career, and when he told me about the hard-working people of Panama whom he met during World War II, his own life and his experiences there reminded me of why I am at Eastern and why we come to work every day to serve our students.

This campus community may be the hardest-working group I have ever been part of. I cannot be more proud of you! And you work together—we work

together! Not only because we cannot get our work done unless we do, but because we enjoy working together—it truly is who we are. And we do so to support the hard-working, resourceful students who come to us to learn about the world, establish themselves in life, and find professional careers. It is a simple model—work hard, work together, support our students. In traveling to South America for three weeks, I stretched myself . . . and now I am home where I belong, reminded of why Eastern is so special. What a marvelous school we have here my friends! Today, let us be renewed in our work.

We have seen other feats of mankind, fueled by need, sparked by the brilliance of individuals, powered by determination, inspiration, and innovation. Curing polio. Charting the human genome.

Creating technologies that allow each of us to communicate with anyone else on the planet—in real time.

Now is time for new challenges. Curing cancer. Fighting the dangers of climate change. Ensuring economic opportunity for new generations and eliminating homelessness. Some of our graduates will be part of those efforts, as members of teams that will address and solve these challenges.

Like the Incas and the engineers who built the Panama Canal, I believe Eastern has the tools, the knowledge and expertise, and the fortitude to reach our own goals. As long as we are moving forward together and stay focused on the welfare and success of our students, we will succeed.

In closing, let me say again that I have much to be thankful for today, and I have every reason to be confident in our future. We do have the strength to make further progress!

Let us find as many ways as possible to make a student's four years at Eastern unforgettable, to make the thought of leaving here to attend another college unthinkable, and to make an Eastern education truly transformational for every one of our students. This is a fitting aspiration for this community, but it will only happen if all of us take my message to heart. Let us make communicating to students on a personal level this year's focal point. Thank you again for coming, and have a great semester!