

State of the University Address
August 28, 2012
Elsa M. Núñez

Greetings everyone! To those of you who are new to Eastern, welcome to the Eastern community! It is great to see everyone here on campus. I hope all of you have had a relaxing and enjoyable summer.

Each year at this time, I share this State of the University Address with the faculty and staff. I think it is important for all of you to get a status report on how the University is doing, with particular emphasis on our financial picture and progress being made in strengthening our academic programs.

In particular, I want to focus today on three topics that will help to give us context as we start the new year. First of all, I am going to talk about our budget — a topic always on people's minds.

I will also talk about some of the initiatives of the new Board of Regents that impact Eastern and for which Eastern faculty members are taking leadership roles. And I want to share some of the exciting developments in terms of our physical plant and facilities projects, all of which are taking place to strengthen our residential, liberal arts campus.

First, let us begin with the budget. As usual, there are positives — realized cost savings and some additional revenues — and challenges — unanticipated expenses and reductions from some revenue sources. Let me share the details.

I will start with some of the challenges we are facing. For one thing, we were instructed to project a five percent increase in the portion of the University's budget that covers our fringe benefits when creating the FY 2013 budget and we did so.

Currently, with fewer workers in the workforce and more retirements, our retirement plan expenses are higher than anticipated, reflecting a greater than five percent increase in most retirement plans. For example, while the SERS Regular Retirement Plan increased 4.1 percent, the SERS Hazardous Retirement increased 32.1 percent, the Alternative Retirement Plan increased 12.1 percent and the Teacher Retirement Plan increased 55.3 percent over FY2012 rates. This is a structural problem that will not go away any time soon. These costs are reflected in our budget.

On the positive, however, the cost for health and dental benefits has remained at the prior year's levels to help offset the higher retirement plan costs.

On a personal note, each of you brings home a paycheck that, for the third time in four years, does not reflect a cost-of-living adjustment.

This is an enormous personal sacrifice by each of you, yet we know it was a necessary part of the budget-balancing process that our Governor, our legislature, and our collective bargaining units negotiated last year.

I thank each of you for that sacrifice, for it meant we could continue to operate without layoffs, and serve our students at the level they expect, and we have come to take pride in.

We also continue to be impacted by the overall economy of the state of Connecticut. The final outcome of the 2011-12 state budget was about a \$120 million deficit, modest when compared to the \$3 billion deficit faced at the start of the biennial budget, but a deficit nonetheless. We also are mindful that the Governor can rescind up to 5 percent of our budget at any time, without legislative action. This, of course, means that we really do not have any excess. If we do, it is in the budget in case the Governor enacts his rescission.

We have felt the impact of previous rescission cuts in the past, and they remind us that we must continue to be diligent and prudent in managing our limited resources as we proceed this year, because what you think you have in your budgets might not be the ultimate reality.

There is, however, good news to report. On the positive side, our enrollment and housing numbers look good. As of mid-July, applications were up 34 percent, registrations were up 3 percent, and we are at 107 percent housing capacity. All of this means more tuition, housing, and food service revenue. That is, indeed, a good thing. I am so appreciative to Vice President Bedini, Chris Dorsey, Vice President Free and Walter Diaz for providing this fantastic result.

We are projecting about \$3.4 million, or 3 percent more, in new revenue for this year, in part due to the 3.9 percent tuition increase approved earlier in the year by the Board of Regents.

If you have been reading the news, you also know that the reorganization of the CSU and community college central offices has netted about \$5.5 million that will be reallocated to the campuses for faculty lines. We are looking at three net new faculty lines at Eastern from those funds. Those positions will support programs in biology, genetics, and bio-informatics, three areas of growth in the bio-sciences industry critical to the future of Connecticut's economy. The allocation of these lines was the focus of discussions with Dr. Kennedy, President of the Board of Regents, and he made the explicit connection to workforce needs.

Knowing how critical tenure-track faculty are to the University's progress and to student success, 17 tenure-track searches were conducted last year, in spite of the budget uncertainties. As a result, we hired the exceptional new faculty members who were introduced this morning. I encourage you to go to the Academic Affairs web site to read the short biographies when they are posted there — you will be very impressed with their accomplishments.

This year, we plan to conduct another 17 searches, with the allocation of searches being tied to elements of the Strategic Plan. For instance, two new tenure positions in biology strengthen that department's emphasis on undergraduate research and lab/field work. Two new hires in Environmental Earth Science will help us put more emphasis on sustainable energy.

A new position in Business Information Systems will support the program's statewide leadership position in Health Informatics, while a new faculty member in business will support the Business and Labor Relations and Human Resource Management programs.

A new hire in Communication will help explore the new field of integrated communication. Two positions in History will allow us to resume our offerings in Asian history and expand our Modern European offerings.

We are also adding positions in Social Work and in the Vocal Studies program in the Performing Arts Department. All of these new positions strengthen Eastern, of course, and our learning outcomes.

I said these are examples of how we are linking budgeting to the current Strategic Plan. However, no better example of that can be found than the Environmental Earth Science Department's work to strengthen its position academically in the state and the nation.

It is the first department to have been identified as distinctive through our Exemplary Program Review Process, recognized for its high impact practices, its retention and graduation rates, faculty research and other factors. Please remember that the current Strategic Plan called for a new assessment model for Academic Programs: The Exemplary Program review process. Many faculty over the last five years have worked on this assessment process. Pilots have been conducted, the Rubric has been changed many, many times and finally the model is solid.

I cannot tell you how gratified I am to Drew Hyatt and the faculty members of the Department for all they have accomplished. The document that Dr. Hyatt submitted as chair is one of the strongest, most thorough assessment documents I have ever read. They did an outstanding job identifying the strengths as well as their weaknesses.

I always said this is a “carrot” approach and that all programs and majors that conduct a thorough assessment through the Exemplary Program will receive net new additional resources.

To support this outstanding program area, we will search for three new faculty hires for fall 2013, including a replacement for the Endowed Chair in Sustainable Energy Studies, Fred Loxsom. That is in addition to two new hires that are starting this fall.

The department has also been allocated a new full-time technical support position, and has been awarded \$25,000 new dollars to support undergraduate research.

I hope this is just the beginning of our commitment to supporting programs that go through the voluntary review process and aspire to be distinctive and exemplary.

I also am pleased to announce that the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities Academic Council gave us the go-ahead earlier this month to begin planning for three exciting new majors that are clearly directed at today’s workforce needs. If all goes well, Genetics & Biotechnology, Health Sciences, and Global Enterprise and Cultures could all be in place by fall 2013. These all connect well to the planning of the Board of Regents.

While it isn’t a dollars and cents issue, I should also note that we have worked very hard to minimize the negative impact of the modified hiring freeze that we are still under.

As you know, we can only hire positions that directly impact and serve students. So new faculty lines are the focus of the Board of Regents. Hiring needed campus police officers is important and necessary and so we have done that in accordance with our safety parameters. We have also reallocated staff to create a new Office of Transitional Services to help entering students transition to college. We have done this by reallocating our own resources.

Marty Levin and Pam Starr are staffing that new office, and they will be enhancing the services that we provide to first-year, transfer, and readmitted students as a result.

Indira Petoskey is now working in the School of Continuing Education to support faculty developing global field courses, assist international students, promote study abroad and increase our non-credit programming. This is also another redeployment of resources. There are other ways in which we have been resourceful. One thing we have also worked very hard on the past few years is to continue to seek ways to reduce energy consumption.

The Encellium lighting project, which achieved a 50 percent reduction in electrical use in Gelsi Young Hall, has been replicated in the library, where we believe we can reduce energy consumption by one million kilowatt hours a year, with a projected savings of \$120,000. This was done using a grant from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

I want to thank Nancy Tinker and Bill Leahy for taking the lead and making energy savings a central piece of their work.

In the same way, the new fuel cell we installed next to the Science Building with our partner, UTC Power, will provide electricity for that building at a significant cost savings over time.

So in sum, while we must continue to practice sound financial management and use our limited resources wisely, we have a balanced budget and can continue to provide our students with a quality liberal arts education in the coming year.

Let me be clear that our balanced budget is only due to the collective commitment of everyone in this room. Without your hard work, personal sacrifices, and daily diligence in managing your budgets, we could not do it. Thank you for everything you do to help keep Eastern's financial condition strong.

Second, I would like to turn my attention now to some of the initiatives coming out of the Board of Regents. As you know, I was appointed earlier this year to a second role, beyond that of being your president. As vice president for the state universities, I am working closely with the Board of Regents and their staff to ensure that our system of Connecticut State Colleges and Universities serves our state's residents with the highest quality education possible, while also working diligently to operate our campuses more efficiently and effectively.

Having been in this role for four months, I see an unanticipated benefit in that Eastern's programs, initiatives, faculty, staff and students are seen as supportive partners with the system office, and are often the benchmark for achievement and success. The Board of Regents certainly gets to hear from me about your successes and achievements on a regular basis!

And, in turn, I have a much clearer understanding of some of the vision, goals, and initiatives of the Board of Regents, and how those initiatives impact our campus.

We are at a time now when our state leaders, and certainly our citizens, want a more seamless, efficient, and effective educational system. That means more collaboration between our state universities and our community colleges, as well as more collaboration between the public colleges and our K-12 system.

I see this as an opportunity for Eastern faculty, staff and students to share our knowledge and expertise, and to demonstrate how well we work collaboratively with others.

So let me describe two of the statewide initiatives the Board of Regents is working on that involve Eastern, keeping in mind that all the work of the Board and of our sister institutions in the Connecticut State College and University System benefit the state of Connecticut.

First, Transfer Articulation. One of Governor Malloy's top educational priorities was to ensure that students can easily transfer credits from our community colleges to the state's public four-year institutions. The Board of Regents and President Kennedy and his leadership team share that vision.

This past March, the Board of Regents approved an agreement to provide for seamless transfer across our 17 public colleges and universities, which includes the four state universities, 12 community colleges, and Charter Oak. By September 30, a 30-credit core curriculum is to be in place, with major-by-major articulation planned by July 2013.

This aggressive approach has only been possible due to the leadership provided by faculty throughout the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System. The Faculty Advisory Committee played a key role in developing the Transfer Policy and Plan. Our representative on the committee, Peter Bachiochi, should be recognized for his contributions to that effort. At this point, faculty have developed a 30-credit core for the colleges, based on competencies that would articulate to the senior institutions. This is a very new concept. Not that a course counting for a course is not the case, but that a student must demonstrate competencies and these competencies be met with one or more courses.

This common community college core, based on a set of core competencies that the community colleges can teach to, will help students who transfer to a public, four-year institution be more successful.

Eastern faculty representatives on the various competency committees include David Stoloff, Barbara Liu, Mariam Chirico, Jian Lin, Janice Wilson, Jeanelle Day, Ann Higginbotham, Wendi Everton, and David Pellegrini. I want to thank all of you for this very important work you are doing.

I think we all know that Eastern's Transfer Compact, which we put in place in 1999, has served as an important model for this system-wide transfer project. You should be proud of that. And as many of you know, this has been a long process. Regent Merle Harris reminded the committee that worked on the project that these discussions have been going on since the 1970s.

Finally, we are making progress! Our students will benefit from a smoother, more coherent system-wide transfer policy.

The second policy matter they are leading is Re-engineering the Remediation Model.

More than 60 percent of all community college students and 20 percent of all four-year students, including many graduating from high school with a 3.0 or higher GPA, require remedial coursework in college.

In the past, like most states, Connecticut and its public colleges have used stand-alone remedial courses to provide developmental instruction to students who fall below basic skill standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. Public Act 12-40 changes all that. This law initially eliminates the low levels of remediation from all campuses. Many of us are very cautious because of the implication this has for access.

By September 2014, we must have an evaluation and skill readiness program in place that will look quite differently from our existing structure. The college readiness of secondary students will be assessed at the 8th and 10th grade levels.

The law basically creates three levels of remedial support in response to the varying levels of student readiness for college.

For students with the highest level of reading, writing, and/or math skills who still need some degree of remediation, instruction will be embedded in entry-level college courses such as our English 100P course, which has become a model for this approach. I want to thank and recognize Professor Rita Malenczyk, who advocated for this approach during her testimony before the General Assembly. Her testimony led to language in the law that reflects her testimony.

Students at the second level of skill will be allowed to take up to one semester of intensive remediation on their campus. Theoretically, a college student could take an intensive course in one semester and an embedded course the second at any of the 17 institutions.

Students at the lowest level of skill will be served at one of four college readiness centers under development. These College Readiness Centers will team up our four state universities and regional community colleges and create clusters to provide readiness instruction. Technology will be used for students' convenience and each center will pilot its own model, based on the work of the regional teams. Instruction offered at a regional center will be shared via technology to all institutions wanting it and tutors will be there to supplement the institution for students in remote locations. Those teams will include:

- Central Connecticut State University, Capitol Community College, Tunxis Community College, Middlesex Community College, Asnuntuck Community College
- Eastern Connecticut State University, Three Rivers Community College, Quinebaug Community College, Manchester Community College

- Southern Connecticut State University, Gateway Community College, Housatonic Community College
- Western Connecticut State University, Norwalk Community College, Naugatuck Valley Community College, Northwestern Connecticut Community College

On September 14, there will be a colloquium at Central Connecticut State University on this topic to identify best practices and give the four regional teams time to develop their own individual models. In the morning, there will be a set of best practices presented which are being used across the nation and then in the afternoon all four regional teams will meet to begin its year-long planning process.

During the next two-year period, the teams will implement their unique programs and the Board of Regents will assess progress to determine what is the best model to use.

We have much work to do on the project, but clearly it will impact Eastern less than the community college. Then it will be substantively alter the way in which remedial courses are delivered to college and pre-college students in our state. In this effort, we need to keep our focus on the students, giving them a better chance of success in college.

So, these are two statewide initiatives being led by our Board of Regents. Both impact Eastern directly, and are designed to improve educational outcomes in our state.

I share these with you so that we can begin to think more broadly of our own work in the context of a stronger, more cohesive educational system in Connecticut designed for the ultimate benefit of our students and our state. I will continue to share news of these and other statewide projects as they progress.

Finally, I want to talk a little bit about some of the ways we are continuing to make improvements to our campus. I have mentioned a few of these projects before, but it is worth sharing some of them again while also giving you news about projects that are still in the planning stages.

I have previously mentioned the new softball field that was dedicated this past spring. If you haven't been down to the field yet, don't wait until next spring to take a look. It's first-class. We still have a few additions such as bleachers, but we are working on it.

One project that we are still working on is 333 North Prospect on the corner of Windham and Prospect Streets. We have done the outside of the house, using capitol funds, and will spend the better part of the next year on the inside. Once it is done, this beautiful Victorian house will be home to our Center for Community Engagement. It is a very explicit way of connecting Eastern to the community. The Center will have ample room to work with the community in meaningful ways.

We also are making progress on a number of infrastructure improvements. While some of these don't have the stature or presence of a new building, they help to maintain the quality and functionality of our facilities. Let me share just a few of those infrastructure improvements with you.

For one thing, we have a new shuttle bus for transporting our students around campus. This makes a total of six (6) buses. We also have upgraded the radio communications for our Police Department - central for the safety of every member of this community. We have plans underway to renovate the lobby of the Sports Center. Speaking of athletics, over the next year we will also be constructing locker rooms and related facilities at the Mansfield Sports Complex. This is much needed space for our athletes.

We are also moving the School of Continuing Education to the Wood Support Center, so that all our students — full-time and part-time — have easy access to advising, registration, and financial aid. They, for too long, have been isolated in the lower part of the campus. Also, this is in preparation for the move of the Visual Arts' department and Performing Arts' department to the new Fine Arts building.

If I was to ask what the biggest need on any college campus is, everyone would say parking. I suspect the second item on the list is storage space, and a new warehouse to help our Facilities Department deal with that issue is being constructed and will be completed next spring. I cannot tell you how patient they have been. They lug things around from long distances and are inconvenienced in many ways.

Also we are moving some of our information technology resources and people to the fifth floor of the Science Building. This places Eastern at the top of the list in the System in terms of the infrastructure we have built in technology over the last five years. We are so proud of our standing.

Nancy Tinker's handout on your tables shows some of the other typical projects we do — roofs, floors, and other improvements to our campus.

We don't always notice when they are done, but it is all part of the process of making this campus one of the most beautiful and well-kept college campuses you will ever see. Thanks again to Nancy and her staff for all the hard work they do for us!

I have deliberately left the major capital project on this campus for last, because it is not only the biggest project since the Science Building was built, but it will move us even closer to realizing our vision as a premier liberal arts college.

I am referring, of course, to the Fine Arts Instructional Building, now in the advanced stages of design. The initial design is in place, a construction manager will soon be hired, and we hope to receive construction funds next year. The goal is to have performing arts and visual arts students in their seats when classes start in a few years. Let me show you some of the design details of this wonderful new addition to our campus.

1. This is an artist's rendering of the building looking east from the Student Center.
2. This is a rendering of the building from High Street.
3. This shows the lobby interior, where we plan to host fundraising and other events.
4. This is a model of the aerial level view from Gelsi Young Hall.
5. This is an aerial view from High Street.
6. This is an aerial view from the Student Center.
7. Here is a model of the large auditorium space in the new building.
8. And this is the view of the stage in the auditorium.

We have floor plans and more details, but I think these images give you a sense of what a beautiful, functional facility the Fine Arts Instructional Center is going to be on this campus when it is finished in 2015. Congratulations to Nancy Tinker and her staff, the Steering Committee, our Visual Arts and Performing Arts faculty, and our architects, for a beautifully designed building.

I have shared a lot of information with you today because I believe it is important for our campus community to know about the decisions and conditions that impact all of us. I have shared information about some statewide projects of the Board of Regents so that we can see the larger context in which our policymakers now view us. And I have shared positive news about

our campus facilities because it indicates that we continue to move forward to build this campus into a premier public liberal arts college.

As you know, we were recently named a Great College to Work For by the Chronicle of Higher Education for the fourth year in a row. This is no automatic award. We have been named again as a great College by Princeton Review. You earned it. Congratulations. Be proud of the community we have here — it is a rare thing, and it is a powerful force.

A politician and orator whom I have always admired is Winston Churchill. As he said to the people of England in the bleak early days of World War II, *“We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival.”* I have felt this way on many occasions because of the downturn in the economy. I am convinced that we are on the cusp of new opportunities, especially as we begin the new Strategic Planning process this semester. Allow me for a few moments to share some reflections that I have about our work here at Eastern.

On August 8, 2012, just a few weeks ago, I stood in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in southern Poland. My reactions to what I saw in the camp as well as my reaction to being physically present there were complicated, strong and paralyzing. I want to share two aspects of the visit that penetrated my soul. First, I went into a room that was part of the museum. You are led by a guide and no one is allowed to walk around without being a part of a guided group. So as I entered the twelve by sixteen room of the museum, I paid close attention to the female guide leading the group.

She was intelligent I had concluded, and I wanted to hear what she had to say. After a few minutes in the room, she called our attention to a case that was in one section of the room. The case which was about four feet from the ground and about eight feet long was made of glass. As she spoke and her words were received by my brain, my body was standing next to the case. Shoes she said, baby shoes are collected in this case. The case contained thousands, thousands of baby shoes. Some were whiter than others – some were light grey – some were worn while others looked newer. My breath got thick as I realized what I was looking at.

Each mother had taken off her babies shoes as well as all the babies clothes as they prepared to enter the gas chamber. Everyone had to enter naked.

Instantly, I thought of my children’s shoes – the ones I have saved since they were babies – Antony, my son, had big wide feet, and I could see baby shoes like his. My daughter, Maria, had a long slender foot and I found myself searching for a shoe like hers. In those split seconds, I was invisible. The idea of taking off my children’s shoes and their clothes to prepare for the gas chamber made me want to disappear.

I panted as quietly as I could until Richard, my husband, said are you ok. I cried as did others, quietly but with a deep sorrow that I have only felt a few times in my life. As everyone moved, it took me several minutes to leave the room since honestly I could not bare to leave the shoes.

Later during the visit, we were taken to Birkenau, which is Auschwitz II, the physical location of the Gas Chambers and Ovens. What was so impactful about this experience was that I stood on the tracks where the train dropped off all the Jews and others who were to be gased and placed in the ovens.

I was there where they were; 1.2 million people who were dropped off to be exterminated on that very spot. Across from that point I looked dead ahead to the gas chamber where they stood next to the ovens. I turned my body away from the train tracks and began to walk to the chambers.

Slowly my legs moved, almost as though they knew. The walk was about from the main entrance of Eastern to Web Hall. I walked, my steps got shorter, no one spoke and as I proceeded down that path, I could only focus on the moment at hand and what I might have felt. My body tightened automatically. Most did not know what was waiting for them.

Their belongings were always taken away, and they were asked to mark everything with their names and date of birth so when they returned, they could collect their belongings. The Nazis did this so that they could hide until the very end what fate awaited them. As they walked most were sick, weak from not eating, and exhausted from a train ride in a cattle car meant for 50 where hundreds and hundreds were packed.

Finally, it seemed like forever, I got to the gas chamber and stood in it and learned how the young Jewish men that were spared were given the job of moving the dead gassed bodies to the ovens to be cremated.

I stood on the ground where the ashes were spread, and I held my husband's hand tightly as we exited the ovens. That night I did not sleep well and my brain and heart processed life and its essence – it reminded me of what is important to me and why I want to live each day. It reinforced my values for family, it made me aware of the falseness of my wants and it made me understand the importance of preservation of places like Auschwitz.

In the Liberal Arts tradition documentation is so important; documenting the facts and allowing us to understand history and to understand the past because scholars have factually documented it – the painful past. In the Liberal Arts tradition, we understand the past so as the adage says “we do not repeat it” and in the liberal arts tradition, we write about it so we can keep it alive for future generations.

Tomorrow the Class of 2016 will walk through those doors and you and I will greet them; most do not know much about the Vietnam War, they have little feeling for the Civil Rights Movement or Cold War. They will have an educational experience at Eastern that will help them understand events of the past and their impact on us today; they will learn how to argue based on the facts not on what “They believe, think or feel.” They will learn to write fiction and non-fiction and through their writing, they will communicate important ideas. They will learn to document the world around them in the Liberal Arts tradition.

So, my friends, our budget is important, our buildings are important, our jobs are important, but educating each person to understand what awful things human beings are capable of doing, to understand what historians have documented over time and to understand what writers have expressed through their creative and scholarly work is the most important work we do. I thank you for doing it so well. I thank you for your commitment.