

Looking Back & Moving Forward

A Brief History of Eastern Connecticut State University





A Legacy of Learning and Leadership

For more than 136 years, Eastern has been a place of learning, opportunity, and service. What began as a teacher training school in downtown Willimantic has grown into Connecticut's designated public liberal arts university, where generations of students, faculty, and staff have worked together to advance knowledge and strengthen communities.

This brief history reflects the people who shaped Eastern — leaders who expanded its reach, educators who inspired their students, and graduates who carried Eastern's mission into the world. Throughout our history, we have championed access, inclusion, and excellence, creating an environment where students from all backgrounds can thrive.

I invite you to reflect on Eastern's past and join me in shaping its future. Together, we will continue a legacy of excellence that transforms lives and contributes to the state of Connecticut and beyond.



Karim Ismaili, President
Eastern Connecticut State University

The Early Years 1889-1918

The “normal school” movement in the United States emerged in the 1830s to train qualified elementary school teachers for the expanding public education system. Connecticut established its first normal school in New Britain in 1849, followed by the Willimantic State Normal School (WNS) in 1889. Initially housed in four rooms on the third floor of the former Willimantic Savings Institute, WNS began with 13 young women enrolled in a two-year teacher training program under the guidance of Arthur B. Morrill.

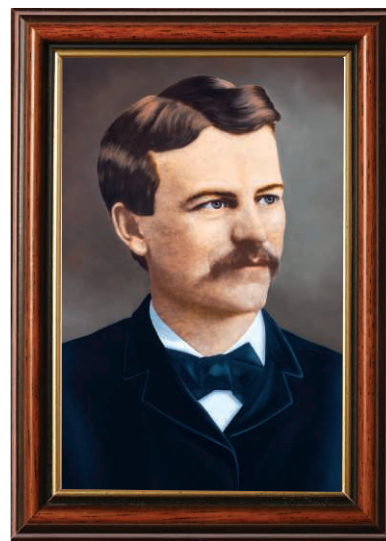
In June 1891, WNS held its first graduation ceremony, sending 22 women into Connecticut’s public schools as educators. By 1894, the school relocated to its first dedicated building, which served as the institution’s sole academic and administrative facility for 49 years until it was destroyed by a fire in 1943.

To enhance teacher training, WNS partnered with a local “model school” in 1912 to provide hands-on student teaching opportunities. Commonly known as the “Windham Street School,” the new structure stood adjacent to WNS on land donated by the Town of Windham, allowing close collaboration between the two schools. This expansion marked an

early commitment to experiential learning, shaping the institution’s evolution into what is now Eastern Connecticut State University.



The first Willimantic State Normal School building was occupied in 1894, and served as the sole classroom and administrative building for 49 years before it was destroyed by fire in 1943.

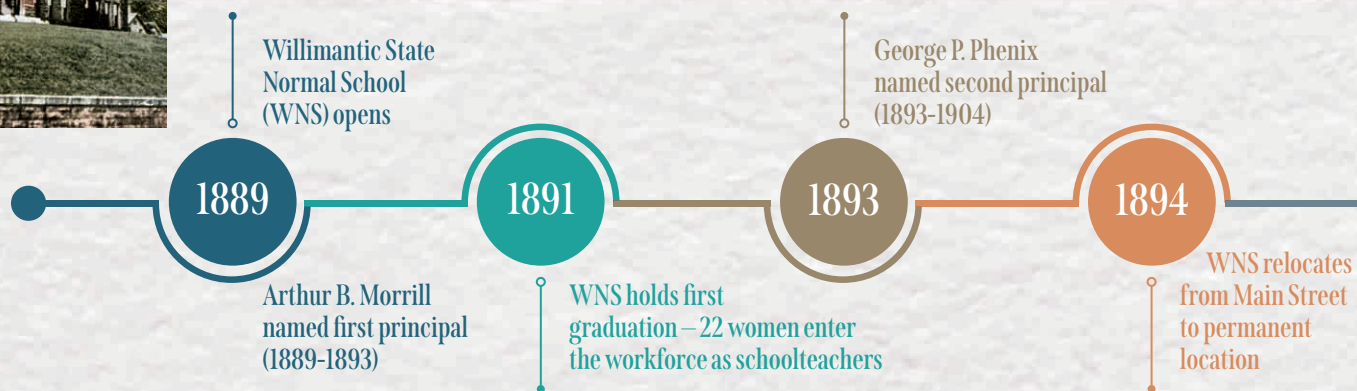


Arthur B. Morrill 1889-1893

Arthur B. Morrill, a Yale graduate, left New Britain Normal School to open the Willimantic program in 1889. In 1893, Morrill left Willimantic to open a normal school in New Haven. He kept tight reins on students and faculty alike, establishing strict guidelines and a standard notebook for all student work.



The 1898 women’s basketball team won their league championship. At the time, players were allowed only three dribbles and three seconds before they had to pass the ball.





George P. Phenix 1893-1904

The second principal of the Willimantic State Normal School, George P. Phenix led the school's move to a new building. He went on to become a faculty member, administrator, and eventually president of Hampton University in Virginia.



The Class of 1912 sits on the steps of the normal school building. Class sizes had grown from 29 students in 1889 to more than 50 students in 1912.



Henry T. Burr 1904-1918

Henry T. Burr served as WNS principal during the World War I era and oversaw construction of a model school where student teachers could practice their craft. The school's first dormitory was built in 1921 and named after him.



The Willimantic Savings Institute on Main Street was the normal school's first home. The building still stands today.



Miriam Skidmore begins tenure (1904-1928) as the lead trainer for student teachers

Henry T. Burr
named third principal
(1904-1918)

1904

1912

Windham
Street Model
School opens



A group of WNS faculty pose for a photo in 1902.

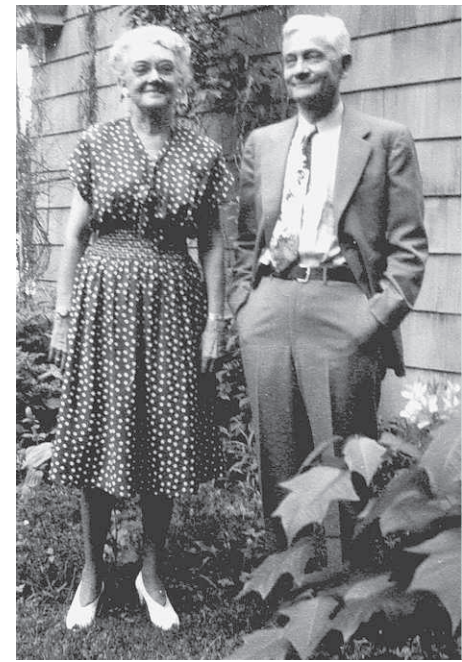


George H. Shafer 1918-1947

George H. Shafer's tenure as principal — and later as president — spanned the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and World War II. During this period, he oversaw the opening of the school's first dormitory, which housed 80 women and was named after Henry T. Burr, WNS's third principal.

The Windham Street School burned down in 1924 and reopened in the same location in 1928. It was later acquired by the campus and named in honor of Frederick R. Noble, the model school's first principal.

Another milestone in Shafer's leadership came in 1937 when he directed the school's transition to a four-year curriculum, leading to its renaming as Willimantic State Teachers College (WSTC). On Sept. 27 of that year, Shafer was formally installed as the college's first president.



Cast members of the school production Spark Plug pose for a photo in 1923.



George Shafer poses with faculty in 1924.

George H. Shafer named fourth principal/first president (1918-1947)

1918

1921

Burr Hall opens (first dormitory)

Windham Street School burns down (reopens in 1928)

1924

1937

WNS renamed Willimantic State Teachers College (WSTC)

Male enrollment large enough for first basketball team

1939

George & Grace Shafer

"The Shafers (George and Grace) 'adopted' me. I would go with them in the summer to their family home in Pennsylvania. They treated me as part of the family. I remained close friends with Mrs. Shafer after George died. She gave me a family heirloom, a hand-carded wool quilt made by President Shafer's mother."

-Josephine Stein '38

By 1939, WSTC had enough male students to form its first men's basketball team. In 1941, the college expanded its academic offerings with its first bachelor's degree in science. However, in 1943, the second major fire in the institution's history destroyed the original normal school building. The

building was rebuilt in 1948 and later named in Shafer's honor.

Shafer's tenure coincided with some of the most challenging economic and environmental crises of the century. By 1932, as the Great Depression deepened, unemployment in Connecticut soared to 26%. The state was further tested by the devastating flood of 1936 and the hurricane of 1938.

World War II brought new challenges and opportunities. While the conflict caused widespread destruction abroad, it spurred economic growth in Connecticut, with the state securing over \$8 billion in wartime aviation and munition contracts. Still, rationing became a way of life, with restrictions on everything from gasoline to canned goods. Through it all, Shafer's leadership helped WSTC navigate economic hardship, natural disasters, and global conflict, ensuring the college continued to grow and evolve.



The original Willimantic State Normal School building was destroyed by fire in 1943 and reopened in 1948.

1941

First bachelor's degree offered (science)



The Willimantic State Teachers College men's basketball team was the division champion in 1942.



The Class of 1932 stands on the steps of the Willimantic State Normal School.



WSTC's 1930s swim team



J. Eugene Smith 1947-1966

James Eugene Smith became president in 1947, having previously taught at Windham High School before joining the WSTC faculty. Under Smith's leadership, the campus expanded beyond its original footprint between Valley and Prospect Streets.

The college acquired acreage "up the hill," adding a student union, new academic buildings, and its first men's dormitory. Recognizing the need for financial support beyond state funding and tuition, Smith established a foundation to secure private contributions.

Compared to the turmoil of the Great Depression and two world wars, Smith's administration oversaw a period of relative stability. Student life thrived with an abundance of clubs, outings, and athletic activities. The curriculum also expanded to include international study tours to Canada, Cuba, and Mexico.



Robert Wickware, known affectionately as "Mr. Science," teaches class.

Despite economic prosperity, American youth in the 1950s grew increasingly restless. A rebellious spirit, embodied by figures like James Dean and fueled by the rise of rock 'n' roll,



The new classroom and administration building — later named Shafer Hall — opened in 1948 on the site of the original normal school building.



Shown here in 1952, the WSTC study tour bus visited many destinations along the Eastern Seaboard.



Students gather for lunch in the Burr Hall dining room.

1947

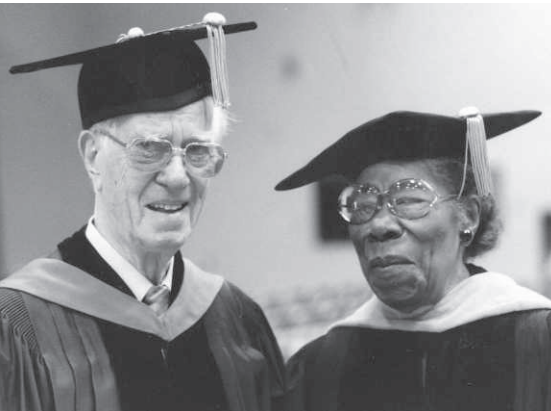
J. Eugene Smith named second president (1947-1966)

1948

New administration/
classroom building opens
(later named Shafer Hall)

1957

First graduate program offered (education)



President J. Eugene Smith and Juliette Burstermann, who was the first African American professor in New England when she joined the faculty of Willimantic State Teachers College in 1948, are reunited in this 1990s photograph.



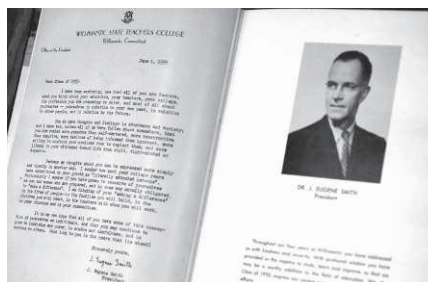
Searle Charles 1966-1970

During his brief tenure as the college's third president, Searle Charles led the school through another name change: Eastern Connecticut State College. He also saw the completion of Goddard and Hurley Halls and the opening of Keelor Hall, the school's first early childhood education facility. Charles left Eastern to become the executive secretary of the Connecticut Community College System.

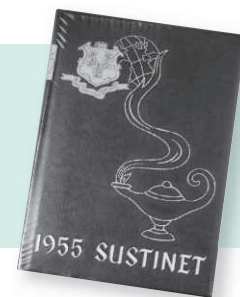
signaled cultural shifts on the horizon. Meanwhile, postwar Connecticut faced job losses as defense contracts ended, and the return of thousands of servicemen further strained the economy. However, the GI Bill provided veterans with access to higher education, leading to a surge in male enrollment at WSTC.

As the college evolved, its first graduate program — focused on education — launched in 1957. Reflecting its expanding academic offerings, the institution was renamed Willimantic State College in 1959.

In 1971, several years after Smith's retirement, the campus library was dedicated in his honor. The J. Eugene Smith Library has since relocated, with the original library building repurposed as the Alvin B. Wood Support Services Center, now housing offices such as the registrar, financial aid, veterans' affairs, accessibility services, and other student support services.



Predating Eastern's designation as Connecticut's public liberal arts university by more than 40 years, President Smith told graduates in the 1955 edition of "Sustinet," the college yearbook, to consider themselves "as 'liberally educated persons' . . . men and women who are prepared, and in some way morally obligated to 'make a difference' . . . in the lives of the families you will build, in the children you will teach, in the teachers with whom you will work, in your churches and in your communities."



Warriors baseball team (1961)

Name change:
Willimantic
State College

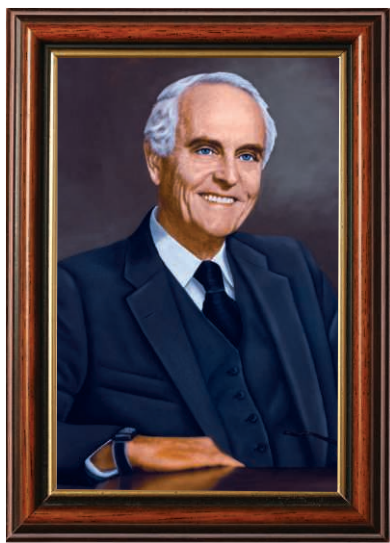
1959

Winthrop Hall
opens (former
student union)

Searle Charles
named third
president (1966-1970)

1966

1967 Name change:
Eastern Connecticut
State College



Charles R. Webb 1970-1988

Charles Richard Webb served as Eastern's fourth president from 1970 to 1988, leading the institution through a period of significant growth and transformation. Enrollment surged from less than 1,000 to more than 4,000 students. Webb oversaw the construction of nine buildings on the North Campus

and introduced new academic programs in environmental earth science, communication, and computer science.

During his tenure, Eastern reorganized into three distinct schools: Arts and Sciences, Education and Professional Studies, and Continuing Education. In 1983, the institution officially became Eastern Connecticut State University.

Webb's presidency coincided with a time of sweeping societal change in the United States. The influence of the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements was evident on campus, where students embraced causes such as environmental activism, gender equality, and affirmative action. Study abroad programs expanded, reflecting a growing global perspective.

A passionate advocate for Division III athletics, Webb played a key role in expanding Eastern's varsity sports programs from four to 11 teams, including six for women. One of his earliest initiatives was securing funding for the \$2.7 million Sports Center, which broke ground in February 1971.



Students stand on New Hampshire's Mt. Washington with Professor Barry Wulff (center).



A 1970s aerial photo of Eastern Connecticut State College's growing campus.

Webb Campus Developments

- Burnap Hall (1970)
- Crandall Hall (1970)
- Original library (1970) — now Alvin B. Wood Support Services Center
- High Rise and Low Rise Apartments (1971)
- Sports Center (1973)
- Robert K. Wickware Planetarium (1974)
- Student Center (1975)
- Occum Hall (1984)



Eastern Connecticut State College men's cross-country team (1977)

1970

Charles R. Webb
named fourth
president (1970-1988)



Robert K. Wickware Planetarium

Eastern's athletic success flourished under Webb's leadership, with the softball team winning a national championship in 1981, paving the way for 10 national Division III titles in baseball and softball.

Beyond academics and athletics, Webb actively engaged with campus life. His musical group, "Grooves of Academe," frequently performed at university events, bringing a sense of camaraderie to the community. Known for his wit, he quipped at his retirement reception in April 1988, "I have been going to school since I was

five, and I think it is time for me to graduate."

The 1970s and '80s were a time of distinct cultural trends, and Eastern students embraced the era's fashion and entertainment. Bell bottoms, platform shoes, and miniskirts were common sights, while mood rings, lava lamps, and pet rocks found their way into dorm rooms. Records gave way to cassette tapes, and students packed into theaters on Friday nights to watch *Star Wars*, *Rocky*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and other cinematic hits.



The 1982 softball team celebrates their second national championship. The team has won five national Division III titles (AIAW 1981, NCAA 1982, 1985, 1986, 1990).



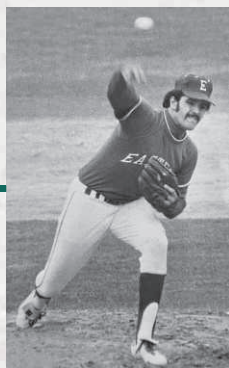
The 1978 graduation procession was headed by President Webb (left) and Governor Ella T. Grasso (right), who provided the keynote address.



Learning outside the classroom flourished in the 1980s, such as with these students scuba diving in Long Island Sound.



The new Spree Day tradition (May 1980) was a weekend-long event that hosted musical stars such as Stevie Wonder.



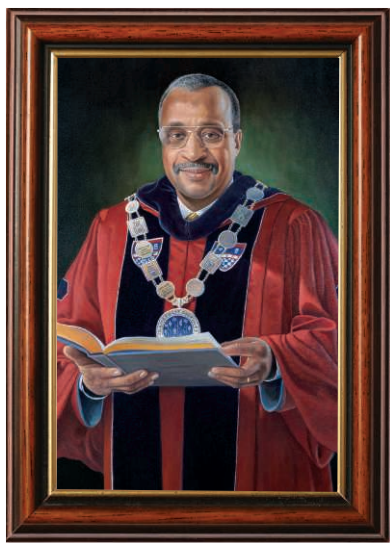
John Caneira was drafted in 1974 by the California Angels.

Baseball wins first of five national championships

1982

1983

Name change: Eastern Connecticut State University



David G. Carter 1988-2006

Eastern experienced significant growth and transformation under the leadership of President David G. Carter from 1988 to 2006. During his tenure, the campus underwent its largest building boom, doubling in size with the addition or renovation of 15 buildings. Developments included new residence halls,

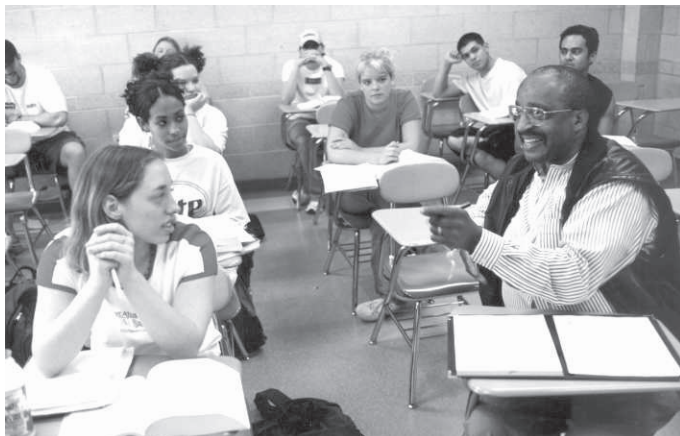
athletic facilities, academic buildings, and the campus's iconic Foster Clock Tower. This expansion was a direct response to a more than 40% increase in student enrollment during Carter's presidency.

Academically, Eastern solidified its reputation with a more defined liberal arts mission, formally approved by the Connecticut State University System Board of Trustees in 1998. Membership in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) followed in 2004, and the faculty introduced an updated Liberal Arts Core (LAC) curriculum. The univer-

sity also expanded its offerings to 33 undergraduate majors, 49 minors, and three graduate programs.

Under Carter's leadership, Eastern broadened its global reach, initiating exchange agreements with universities in Sri Lanka, France, Japan, Uganda, Brazil, and beyond. Study abroad opportunities flourished, and the number of international students on campus increased.

Known for his hands-on approach, Carter was deeply engaged in student life. Whether taking a turn in the Spring Fest



President Carter enjoyed visiting classrooms to engage students in their learning.

Providing service to the community was a priority of President Carter's administration. Presently, students continue to donate thousands of volunteer hours each year.



Luva Mead Hoar '42 (left) and Bernice "Bunny" Niejadlik '50 stand with President Carter in front of the construction of two new residence halls in 1997, named in their honor in 2001.

1988

David G. Carter
named fifth president
(1988-2006)

1998

CSU Board of Trustees
approves Eastern's
liberal arts mission

2004

Eastern joins the Council
of Public Liberal Arts
Colleges (COPLAC)



J. Eugene Smith Library

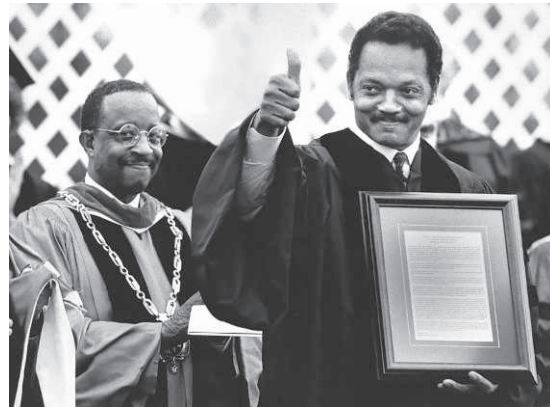


Charles R. Webb Hall

dunk tank, playing billiards in the residence halls, or offering mentorship and guidance, he was a familiar and approachable presence for students.

As enrollment grew throughout the 1990s, so did residential life. More students lived on campus, student clubs expanded, and varsity athletic teams grew to 17, providing numerous opportunities for engagement. Meanwhile, rapid technological and cultural shifts shaped the millennial student experience.

The rise of the World Wide Web, the popularity of grunge and hip-hop music, the proliferation of cell phones, and the advent of instant messaging transformed how students connected and



Noted social activist Jesse Jackson was the keynote speaker at Eastern's 1992 commencement exercises.

communicated. At the same time, issues such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and community service became central concerns for Eastern's student body, reflecting a renewed commitment to civic engagement and activism.

Carter Campus Developments

- Charles R. Webb Hall (1992)
- Frederick R. Noble Hall renovation (1992)
- Dr. Arthur L. Johnson Unity Center (1997)
- Baseball stadium (1998) and sports complex (1999)
- Niejadlik Hall (1998)
- Admissions Building (1999)
- Foster Clock Tower (1999)
- J. Eugene Smith Library (1999)
- Mead Hall (1999)
- Frederick A. Gelsi and Leslie T. Young Hall (2002)
- First parking garage (2003)
- Constitution, Laurel, and Nutmeg residence halls (2005)
- Margaret S. Wilson Child and Family Development Resource Center (2006)



Admissions Building



Margaret S. Wilson Child and Family Development Resource Center



Student Residential Village opens in 2005 (Laurel Hall, Nutmeg Hall, Constitution Hall).

2006

Michael Pernal serves as interim president



Elsa M. Núñez 2006-2024

A native of Puerto Rico, Elsa Núñez became the first Latina president of a New England public university in 2006. Under her leadership, Eastern strengthened its academic reputation, expanded educational opportunities, and enhanced student success.

The construction of the Dr. David G. Carter Science Building (2009) and the Fine Arts Instructional Center (2016) advanced Eastern's programs in the arts and sciences. By 2021, Eastern was ranked #1 among public universities in New England by U.S. News & World Report for the third consecutive year.

A champion of educational access, Núñez played a pivotal role in Eastern becoming a national leader in supporting undocumented students. In 2016, TheDream.US foundation selected Eastern as one of two universities to pilot its scholarship program for high-achieving, undocumented students. Today, Eastern is the program's largest campus partner, enrolling more than 350 Opportunity Scholars with a 97% retention rate and an 89% graduation rate — some of the highest student success rates on campus.

Recognizing the need to bolster academic support, Núñez consolidated services into the Academic Success Center, offering peer tutoring, advising, career counseling, and writing/math assistance. Under her leadership, Eastern achieved the highest four-year graduation rate among Connecticut's four state universities.

During her tenure, Eastern grew both in size and student engagement. The Student Center was remodeled in 2008, student clubs increased from 60 to 100, and the campus hosted more than 2,000 student events annually. The Arthur L. Johnson Unity Wing brought together the Pride Center, Women's Center, and Intercultural Center, reinforcing Eastern's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Sustainability emerged as a campus priority, with initiatives such as a campus thrift shop and food pantry for food-insecure



Fine Arts Instructional Center



Students serve Thanksgiving meals to community members during the annual Day of Giving.



Student Center renovated and reopened in 2008.

Elsa M. Núñez named sixth president (2006-2024)

2006

2007

First Day of Giving (community Thanksgiving meal)

Science Building opens

2009

Center for Community Engagement (CCE) opens



Dr. David G. Carter Science Building (dedicated in 2021)

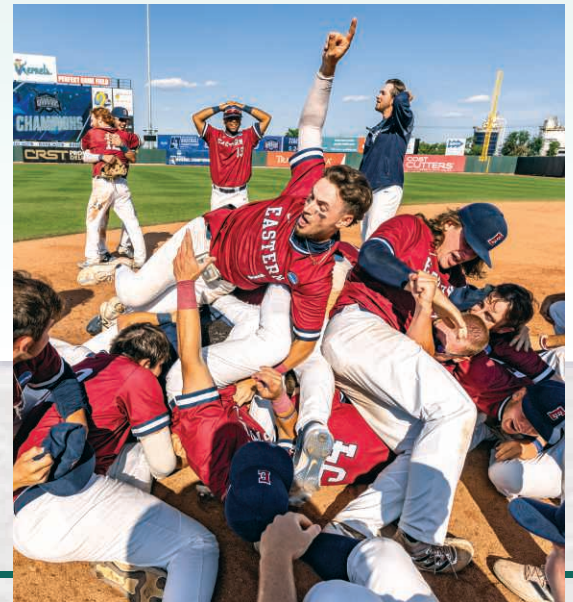
students. Community ties were strengthened with the opening of the Center for Community Engagement in 2009. The student-driven Day of Giving launched in 2007, providing Thanksgiving meals to Willimantic residents — a tradition that continues today.

Núñez's tenure coincided with significant global and technological shifts. The omnipresent smartphone and the rise of social media, streaming services, and mobile apps transformed how students interact with the world. Meanwhile, economic and environmental challenges — from the 2008 recession to the COVID-19 pandemic — reshaped higher education and underscored the importance of resilience.

Student-athletes excelled under Núñez, winning the LEC Commissioner's Cup for six consecutive years and the LEC Presidents' Cup a record seven times for academic performance. The baseball team won the NCAA Division III national championship in 2022.



Eastern's first cohort of TheDream.US scholars (2016)



The baseball team celebrates winning the 2022 national championship. The team's five NCAA Division III titles include 1982, 1990, 1998, 2002, 2022.

Fine Arts Instructional Center (FAIC) opens

2011

Softball field relocated to Mansfield Athletic Outdoor Complex

2016

2022

Baseball wins fifth national NCAA championship



Karim Ismaili 2024-

Karim Ismaili began his appointment as Eastern's seventh president on July 31, 2024. Before joining the university, he was executive vice president and provost at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts.

A first-generation college student who grew up in London, England, and then moved to Canada at age 13, Ismaili earned a master's degree in criminology at Cambridge University before receiving a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Western Ontario. He delved into research and taught criminology at several universities beginning in 1997 before transitioning to administrative leadership in 2006.

During his inaugural semester, the university introduced a revised liberal arts curriculum called the Eastern Liberal Arts Core (ELAC). This streamlined program, designed for all



President Ismaili mingles with students during the annual Student Involvement Fair.

Eastern students, emphasizes five key learning outcomes: critical thinking, ethical reasoning, communication, creativity, and quantitative literacy.

During his first 100 days in office, Ismaili conducted an extensive "Listening and Learning Tour," affirming Eastern's strong sense of community and dedication to providing an outstanding liberal arts education. He also

greenlit the production of an episode of Amazon's *The College Tour*, which showcased Eastern's campus, academic programs, and student life to a national audience.

His tenure marks the beginning of a new chapter in Eastern's history, building upon the university's legacy while setting a course for continued excellence and boundless opportunities.



The College Tour cast

Karim Ismaili named seventh president (2024-present)

2024



Nursing program holds first White Coat Ceremony in 2025.



President Ismail joins the Class of 2028 for a commemorative photo in fall 2024, marking his first semester at Eastern.



Join us in shaping the future of Eastern Connecticut State University by contributing to the **Presidential Strategic Initiatives Fund.**

Your generosity helps support student scholarships, enhance academic programs, invest in faculty and staff development, and strengthen student services. Gifts to this fund empower President Ismail to advance initiatives that uphold Eastern's mission and values.



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EASTERN
CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

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