



August 20, 2024

Confidence. It's an important quality in a leader, and a crucial emotion for people to feel about the institutions in their communities. Confidence is bred, and it is earned.

But sometimes confidence dips. That's been the case for higher education as a whole. Indeed, a recent Gallup Poll showed that an increasing proportion of adults in the United States lack confidence in colleges and universities. Respondents were concerned about several things, including whether schools were teaching relevant skills.

Higher education began as something designed for the most elite in society, with little focus on practical, real-world skills. Since then, we have seen the pendulum swing many times, from an academic focus to a career-focused education and back again. Now, universities are trying to balance the two to meet the needs of both students and the workforce.

This is occurring against a backdrop of significant growth in the Upstate, with about \$20 billion in capital investment and 55,000 new jobs. Meanwhile, there is a shortage of highly skilled workers to fill these jobs and keep our economy going strong. The percentage of people ages 20 to 64 was 60 percent in 2000 and is projected to decline to 56 percent by 2030, while the percentage of the state's population under the age of 20 was 28 percent in 2000 and is projected to dip to 23 percent by 2030.

This is something that's been on my mind, and on the agenda at the University of South Carolina Upstate. Heading into the new academic year, I encourage everyone to bring a sense of confidence to their studies, classrooms, and sports contests. So, we are working hard to provide you, our students, with an unparalleled academic experience while giving you skills you can apply to the real world, and to successful careers that will meet workforce demands.

We are mixing high-impact experiential learning with cutting-edge research, deeply connected community engagement, and course-to-career pathways. We are taking a close look at our degree offerings, examining and expanding our partnerships with employers, and using innovation and technology to adapt and meet demand.

Our students need an education that is both practical and academic. Only then can we create greater economic growth and equity in the region, and build greater confidence in the value of higher education.

I've seen that value for myself; my education helped take me from a farm in Mississippi to the Chancellor's chair at USC Upstate. I have experienced, firsthand, the transformative power of America's higher education, a force that has strengthened our nation and shaped my life and that of my family.

Education can be an equalizer, empowering people to find their purpose and seek social and economic mobility. There are obstacles, of course, but, as said in a Wendell Berry poem, the "impeded stream" is "the one that sings."

That's the true journey of education. If we're not challenged, we're not fully engaged. Maneuvering around the obstacles creates the music.

With all of this in mind, we at USC Upstate have created a roadmap for the future: The Greater 2030 Strategic Plan.

This culmination of more than year of extensive dialogue, collaboration, work groups, and evaluation was unveiled at the Board of Trustees meeting in March 2024 and serves as a comprehensive blueprint for our future—with innovative ways to better serve our students, enhance recruitment efforts, and expand our partnerships.

The plan illustrates our commitment to evolving with our students' needs and the workforce's demands. It is designed to ensure that we provide a valuable and transformative learning experience through high-impact experiential learning, cutting-edge research, and deeply connected community engagement.

Already this thinking and planning has paid off. This fall we are enrolling the largest entering class in our history, with 2,000 students.

- The total number of new freshmen is 772, up 21%

- The total number of transfers/readmits is 788, up 8%
- 99% of full-time incoming students who attended Orientation are enrolled at Upstate
- Full-time incoming students come to Upstate from almost every county in SC and over 20 states

As we move forward, we face both opportunities and challenges. We are positioned to navigate all of this effectively, ensuring we continue to provide exceptional education and prepare you for success in a dynamic world.

Together, we can make the difference. We can be confident—in ourselves, our school, and in higher education as a whole—and help create a brighter tomorrow for everyone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor