

BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH SODEXO'S MARK WATKINS



*Mark Watkins (left) and Dr. Bennie Harris
Photo by Terry Manning, USC Upstate*

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Mark Watkins, President and Chief Operating Officer of Sodexo Campus, which provides educational institutions with culinary experiences and expertise in cleaning, landscaping, and maintenance solutions.

Harris: I'm excited about this conversation. I've been in higher education for a number of years, and at three of the institutions that I've worked with — including USC Upstate — I have worked with Sodexo. So, we're very proud of this relationship.

Let's dive right in. Sodexo talks about how academic excellence isn't the only thing that draws students to a university; students also are looking at the experiences available on that campus, including dining. How important is food and food service to the growth and health of colleges these days? Do dining experiences set schools apart from each other?

Watkins: The dining is just as important as any other service you have on campus, between parking, facilities, and housing. If you think about it, dining is one of the most frequented services on campus. So, parents want to see what their children are going to be eating and where, when they show up on campus.

Back when we were in school, it was a service line, and you got what they put on your plate. Now, it's more like a restaurant experience, which definitely aids in your ability to recruit and sometimes retain as well.

Harris: What trends are you seeing, in terms of what students want when it comes to campus dining? Are they looking for healthier options? Do trends appear elsewhere in the food-service industry and then show up on campuses, or do campuses often lead the way? I'm thinking about things like allergy-safe dining areas and sustainable containers for takeout.

Watkins: Today's student basically influences what we offer, and students today want restaurant-style food. They want allergen-free foods and plant-based foods. You have your pizza and grill items, but it's important to have variety within your programs.

Harris: So, I would imagine that pricing in, trying to figure out your return on investment with these types of things can be pretty complicated, because you have to cater to those students who are looking for healthy options, those students who may be looking for different types of traditional options, an allergen-free or plant-based option, and more. So how do you manage that diversity in your products and your services?

Watkins: That's called menu engineering. You have to provide that because the students that you're recruiting and you're having on campus come from all places. And today's student has allergies to things that I never even knew about 15 or 20 years ago. So, making the products available is key.

We use data. So, let's say you serve 400 students for lunch, and only 20 percent of them ate at certain stations. You adjust your production. We look at it from a plate-cost perspective. So, if an average student eats \$3.50 a plate or \$4 and \$5. Let's say you put in a new menu item or take one out, your average cost goes up.

We try to menu-engineer. It's about adjusting the menus and the platforms in order to fit the needs of the students within budget.

Harris: As I'm sure you're well aware, the labor shortage is significant, and we at USC Upstate are looking for ways to better equip our graduates for the evolving needs of the workplace. How is Sodexo managing the current employment landscape? Are you using more technologies to provide efficient service?

Watkins: The labor market has been a challenge throughout the country for us, and it is even worse in certain pockets. There's more of a challenge at the rural universities. We are doing more with less. And so, you have to use technology. There is no going backwards.

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So, I always tell people, “If you think about doing what you did in 2017 or 2018 in today’s environment, you’re just not going to be successful.”

The labor market itself is changing too, because a lot of the people that we relied on that have been here for a long time that can do anything, they retired right in the middle of the pandemic. The people we have in the workforce now don’t work the same way.

So, we’ve had to adjust to that. The new managers and the new leaders that are graduating from college have a different mindset about work.

Technology is in our space and it’s never going away. So now we have to figure out how best to utilize that. So, I can’t say we have an answer that completely satisfies that need. We’re continuing to explore it.

Harris: I’ve heard that some campuses have made use of robots for food service and delivery.

Watkins: During the pandemic, people were isolated in spaces and wanted food brought to them. So, in some cases we used the robots. They were great during the pandemic. And now they’ve kind of petered off because students are coming out of that isolation and they’re wanting to gather more with friends.

So, we’re doing more with apps and pre-orders, and setting up stations where people can grab and go, quickly. One other thing we’re exploring right now is drone delivery service. We’re still trying to figure out how that would work, but that technology is out there right now.

Harris: So, the pandemic — I imagine it was a difficult time, business-wise, given that students were home, or were confined to their dorm rooms and didn’t get out as much. So, what lessons did Sodexo learn?

Watkins: Students want what they want when they want it. So, we had to pivot to figure out how to make that happen within the current business models that we have, because our systems were set up for a traditional resident dining facility.

We realized during the pandemic that we needed solutions that gave us the ability to get food to where students were. We also had to do things hands-off. So as opposed to having cashiers at certain places, we created a technology where people could go to a convenience store without having a clerk there.

We got the cameras and all that kind of stuff there. Folks could grab their stuff and either charge their credit card or put things on to a scale and pay that way.

So, you’d put your credit card in before you walked in the door and there was nobody else there. Students went shopping. There

was a camera that checked and, if you grabbed something, it charged your credit card for it. If you put it back, the money went back to your card.

That sort of technology — along with the pre-orders, the robots, all of that — really took root during the pandemic and, in some cases, still makes sense for us to do today. They may be slightly modified, but they are things that will continue to evolve over time.

Harris: I appreciated that, during such a tragic and drastic time as the pandemic, we learned to be nimble in ways we were not before, and to think about innovation differently. That may have really helped propel us to move faster than we had anticipated.



We provide facility services, so that goes from project management to HVAC work to plumbing, electric, roofing, custodial services — the full gamut. We’re sort of a turnkey solution for universities when they have a need. We tend to do that when we’re a partner with you on the food side.

Watkins: The pandemic was tough for all of us. We see ourselves as a business partner. Partners figure things out in the middle of a crisis. The pandemic was a true test as to whether these were true partnerships or not.

Harris: I’d like to hear more about the landscaping, cleaning, and maintenance solutions offered by Sodexo. I imagine this is a key part of the business, given that it’s so important for college campuses to make a good visual impression and create environments where learning, fun, cleanliness, and comfort all exist together.

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Harris: Let’s switch gears: what did you want to do when you what did you want to be when you grew up?

Watkins: I thought I was going to be on Wall Street. I was going to be a finance broker. I saw a bunch of shows about the Wall Street guys, the financial brokers, all that power, all that money, making trades, all that stuff just excited me. I’ve always loved finance.

Harris: What made you decide to pursue degrees in management while attending Iowa State University for your bachelor’s and Mount Vernon Nazarene University for your master’s? And why did you go into food service?

Watkins: I grew up in the in the food service world management world. Ours was an entrepreneur household. My father was the first Black McDonald’s franchisee in Detroit. So, I grew up in that world. I was a fry cook for at 9, 10 years old, and I was the crew chief by 13.

It was in my blood. So, I went to college thinking I was going either do finance or do management. And I just figured one of those two would land me where I wanted to go. So, when I finished up college at Iowa State, I stayed in the food service business and said, “I’m going to do this until I find a real job.”

Now I’ve been in it for over 37 years.

Harris: So, what led you to Sodexo?

Watkins: I’d worked for many organizations. Sodexo came knocking on the door. And to me, it’s about people. I got a great feeling for the people I might be working for. And I did the people thing first, and then I did the research.

Harris: What are some of the challenges facing Sodexo today?

Watkins: The labor market for sure would be an ongoing challenge, where it’s challenging to find the right people who want to work in this industry. It’s a tough space, but a rewarding one.

The average chancellor or university president is in the job three to four years, and chief financial officers are changing every three to four years as well. Anytime those two positions change, everything else changes along with it. When universities are challenged to try to get students in the door on campus, we are challenged with that as well. And we’re challenged to help the universities find different ways to service the students while still meeting the directives that will help the universities grow and retain their students.

Harris: I’d next like to talk next about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don’t know what’s going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what’s at play in or-

der to make a project or a plan successful. We use data, and know how decisions are made. But many times, we have to make decisions, big decisions about things when we don't know what's going on under the surface. How do you navigate leadership when you don't know what's below the line?

Watkins: I do a pretty good job expanding my network. I learned that you have to get to know people in different facets of your organization and institution. If they know and trust you, then some of that information will come your way.

And you have to know when to ask the questions. I've always done that. And within Sodexo, it's the same way. I truly think when people trust you, they will share more. You can always get surprised with something. But if your network is strong and there are people who can help influence change, folks would be willing to work with you to help you navigate through the things that are unforeseen.

Harris: So how would you describe yourself as a leader? And what do you think your employees would say about you?

Watkins: We all take the personality test, and mine says I am an authoritative leader. I like structure. I like to make sure that people are clear on what the expectations are. And they know I'm going to hold them to it.

I think that it's key, especially when you have an organization that is changing, and we're all changing right now. So, one of the reasons I was brought back to Sodexo was to help the company navigate in these new times and look at how we fix our infrastructure to make sure that we're successful long term.

So, I'm providing lots of guidance, but empowering the team to make decisions.

My team would say, I'm the alpha in the room. And I set high expectations for them and for myself. I'm decisive but fair.

Harris: Do you have a hero?

Watkins: My hero is my father. I would not have said that 20 years ago. But I have a huge appreciation for what he's done and where he's been. He was born down in Memphis, and he strove to be more than just the cotton fields. He went from there to getting a scholarship to USC and ended up being transferred to Iowa State, where he was their first Black All-American in 1959 and 1960. He played professionally with Detroit Lions and then Detroit's first Black franchisee for McDonald's.

He never let adversity get in his way. He found a way to navigate through it and still keep his vision and his goals. I never knew failure because that's never came into our discussions at home. We always knew if you wanted it, you had to go get it. And don't be waiting on somebody else to give it to you.

He passed away in 2012 of a rare heart disease, at about 73 years old. Three days before he passed, he said: I got no regrets, and I'm very proud of my children.

Harris: That's amazing. I would have loved to have interviewed him.

Watkins: He would have loved to been here. And you would not have been able to get him out of here.

Harris: Finally, do you have a mantra or a quote that speaks to you as a leader?

Watkins: So, my favorite quote, and I still use it today, is: "Make today better than yesterday and make tomorrow even better." Always pushing for excellence.

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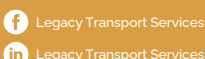


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