

BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR BENNIE L. HARRIS SPEAKS WITH DR. L. JEFFREY PEREZ, PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION



*Dr. Bennie Harris (left) and Dr. L. Jeffrey Perez
Photo by Terry E. 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 Dr. L. Jeffrey Perez, the new president and executive director of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education. (This article has been edited for content, clarity, and length.)

Harris: Hi, Jeff. Thanks so much for sitting down with me today. Let's start from the beginning: Where did you grow up, and how did you first become interested in the field of higher education?

Perez: Well, people say that I still haven't lost my New York accent. I grew up on Long Island in New York. When I was growing up, I always was interested in why things happened when we'd go on vacation to upstate New York. We'd be going through a small town that, to me, was in the middle of nowhere. I always wanted to know why was that town there? That drove me to an interest in history. After high school, I went to college and studied history. I went to Georgetown undergraduate and really was driven to answer the question of why things happen. From there, I got the degree and I continued to pursue history and went to Binghamton University in New York for my master's in American history.

I saw an opportunity to become a fellow in the New York State Senate, which was a program for graduate students. And that really had a powerful impact on my career in my life, because I went from asking why things happen to working in the legislature and asking the questions about how do we make things happen. Then I went on for my doctorate at William and Mary.

Harris: You went on to accumulate 25 years of experience in higher education, with 16 years in South Carolina. What did you learn

during your work in other states that you were able to apply here? What's different and unique about our state?

Perez: I've had a really interesting career; it hasn't been what you'd call a straight line. People go for their doctorate and they become professors, deans, campus presidents. But I didn't do that. I came back to Albany and I became a head of research for the School Boards Association in New York. And then I worked for the State University of New York, which was 64 campuses at the time, with about 400,000 students.

I went from there to working at Shawnee State University, a small public school at the very southern tip of Ohio. So, I had the experience of seeing policy made at the very highest levels and then seeing the impact that a college education can make on a first-generation college student.

That really inspired me to want to make sure that we can provide that opportunity for as many people as possible.

Harris: Before leading SCICU, you served as Winthrop University's vice president for university relations. And prior to that you were vice president for external affairs at The Citadel, where you helped the institution achieve record enrollments and the highest annual giving in its history. Tell me a bit about how you and the teams at The Citadel accomplished that.

Perez: In my role leading communications, I like to say campus operations is the bugle, and we're the horn. You're not necessarily making the music, but you're making it sound a little better and a little louder. We were helping to articulate the message about the great education the Citadel offered, our fundraising that supported it, and making sure that message reached as wide an audience as possible.



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For example, we put out the campus magazine and put a lot of work into it. There was an alumnus who had lost touch with The Citadel but somehow got the magazine. He was so inspired, he became a major donor. It happens that way.

Harris: At Shawnee State University in Ohio, you worked as director for Communications and Government Affairs, rebuilding the public relations operation while serving as secretary to the board of trustees. While there you secured the first federal funding in the university's history. Can you tell me about what these experiences taught you about higher education and institutional advancement?



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Perez: It was about sharing a vision and getting people excited about it, and getting them to want to invest. We were also building up our digital simulation and gaming program. We went to our congresswoman for help, showing her what we really needed to move these programs forward. We needed an immersive lab. She was excited about that and helped us secure the funding. And now Shawnee State — a small, public college in Ohio — has one of the top digital gaming and simulation programs in the country.

Harris: How would you describe your leadership style? How would others describe it?

Perez: I'm a big believer in listening, finding out what your team needs, making sure they have the resources to be successful, and then setting clear goals. It's essential to hold individuals accountable —not in a "gotcha"

way, but to have the means to measure and celebrate success.

You don't know what people say in the coffee room, but I'd like to think they say I work hard, and that I don't ask anyone to do something I'm not willing to do myself — that I lead from the front.



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Harris: What do you see as some of the priorities and opportunities for higher education in South Carolina?

Perez: I like to talk about the intellectual pipeline here in South Carolina, and that starts with child care and pre-K and goes all the way to a doctoral program. The South Carolina Commission on Higher Education plays a very important role; we work to make sure higher education is meeting the needs of South Carolina and its citizens.

It's important to me that the pipeline is seamless, which is why I'm really excited about the Coordinating Council for Workforce Development that's been in operation for about a year and a half. I've had many discussions with the staff there about the role of higher education and how we can effectively integrate our efforts into workforce development in order to present South Carolina as a compelling option for companies that want to move here. We also want to meet the needs of businesses that already call our state home.

Harris: This is very important to us too, and why in October we will convene the second annual Upstate Talent Forum, bringing business and education together to talk about talent gaps and how to fill them.

Perez: That's really important.

Harris: I'd next like to talk 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 order to make a project or a plan successful.

Perez: I've been attending Commission on Higher Education meetings for years and often collaborated with CHE staff. However, as much as I may have thought I knew the organization, I was on the outside; there was so much going on with which I wasn't

familiar. I keep coming back to a line from Walt Whitman: "Be curious, not judgmental." By that I mean, put your preconceptions aside. Be curious, ask questions. And I think as a leader, you must have the humility to know that you don't have all the answers, but you have a duty to study hard and ask the right questions.

And it's important that you have a vision. You have to get people excited about what you're trying to accomplish. Without goals they won't become engaged stakeholders.

Harris: Outside of work, how do you like to spend your time? Any hobbies?

Perez: Lately, there hasn't been a lot of time outside of work. But my wife and I like to go for walks and watch, if not play, tennis. I like old movies and TV shows, like Westerns. I don't enjoy them just because they're Westerns. It's because many of them had episodes that were just 30 minutes long. The writing on them had to be tight, to be able to tell a compelling story in so short a time.



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Harris: Do you have a hero?

Perez: I'd have to call my wife my hero. From her I've learned unconditional love. And trust me, to be married to me all these years, the love has to be unconditional.

Also, my father means a lot to me. Growing up, I learned patience from him.

And when I was at the Citadel, Lt. Gen. John W. Rosa Jr. was president there, and I learned a lot about being a leader from him. He's a strategic thinker who can articulate a plan and put it into a broader context. And he embodied being cool under pressure. In the current environment that's a talent higher education leaders need to exercise every day.