



February 19, 2025

As I reflect on the state of higher education today, I find myself drawn back to the lessons of my childhood — a childhood shaped by the soil of the Mississippi Delta, by the resilience of my parents, and by the unwavering belief that education is an equalizer.

Growing up in the Jim Crow South on a 60-acre cotton farm, I learned early that the world does not always open its doors freely. But I also learned that the kindness and wisdom of others — no matter their background — could light the path forward. My white math teacher, Mrs. Hemphill, saw something in me and encouraged my love of numbers. Dr. Madison at Mississippi State University pushed me toward a future in higher education. Dr. Harvey Jackson, my minister, helped me find strength in faith. These individuals, each from different walks of life, helped shape me. They were a testament to something I hold as a guiding truth: Education, when truly embraced, is not about division — it's about connection and empowerment.

Today, we see higher education caught in the crosswinds. We hear the rhetoric that questions its value, the battles over what can be taught, and the efforts to diminish the voices that have fought to be heard. We watch as the cost of college becomes a barrier for too many students, and as the very institutions that should be sanctuaries of knowledge become battlegrounds for culture wars.

But we cannot let this chaos consume us, and we cannot let division define us. Because the true power of higher education — of this great and imperfect American experiment — lies in its ability to bring people together, to broaden perspectives, and to remind us that we are all part of this nation's history and its fabric, no matter where we come from, what we look like, or whom we love.

History has shown us time and again that progress does not come without resistance. Black History Month and Women's History Month remind us that the road to equality has always been steep and that the struggle for justice has never been easy. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from a Birmingham jail cell, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Those words were true then, and they are true now. What affects one of us affects us all.

I'd like to tell a story here:

There was once a man who spent his life wandering between villages, never staying too long in one place. One day, he came upon a river with a powerful current. He managed to cross it, though barely.

Instead of continuing on his journey, the man stopped, gathered wood, and began building a bridge. A traveler approached and asked, "Why are you building this bridge? You've already crossed the river."

The man smiled and replied, "Because one day, someone else will come to this river — someone with fewer resources, someone more afraid. They will stand where I once stood, wondering if they can make it across. This bridge is not for me; it is for them."

Higher education is that bridge. It has carried countless individuals over seemingly impassable waters. It has lifted voices that might have otherwise been silenced.

Today it may seem that forces are trying to dismantle our bridges. But we must keep building. We must continue to create opportunities, open doors, and reinforce the idea that knowledge belongs to all. The purpose of education has never been to serve only those who already stand on solid ground — it is to ensure that no one is left behind on the other side of the river.

To those who fear they will be left on one side of the river and that the challenges facing higher education — and other parts of American life — are too difficult, I offer this: I see you, I hear you, I support you. And higher education is here for you.

Education has endured wars, economic crashes, segregation, and upheaval. And each time, it has emerged stronger — because at its core, education is about the human spirit, about the pursuit of something greater than the self. It is about passing knowledge from one generation to the next so that we might build a future more just, more inclusive, and more full of promise than the past.

The turbulence of today can't make us forget the long arc of history. In every classroom, in every lecture hall, and in every mind opened by learning, there is the potential to transform not just one life, but the world. That is something worth standing for.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor