



March 17, 2025

My mother's education ended after the tenth grade. That was not because she lacked the intelligence or the drive, but because opportunities for young African-American girls in the rural South were scarce. Despite this, she instilled in me and my siblings the deepest respect for education. She taught me that education was not just a tool for personal advancement but created opportunities to open doors, break cycles, and change lives. She taught me that knowledge is the great equalizer and the bridge to a better life, even if she could not cross it herself.

Her story is not unique. Across the globe, mothers wake up every morning with education on their minds. In communities where girls still fight for the right to go to school, we see an unwavering determination. From Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls in Pakistan to the millions of mothers in developing nations who sacrifice everything to send their daughters to school, education remains the most powerful tool for breaking cycles of poverty and oppression.

The evidence is undeniable: When women are educated, communities flourish. Studies show that countries with higher female education levels experience stronger economic growth, lower infant mortality rates, and greater political stability. Women with education reinvest in their families, promote health and wellness, and drive innovation.

In the U.S., women are earning degrees at record rates, entering industries once closed to them, and leading companies, nonprofits, and government agencies. Yet progress is fragile. The fight for women's equity in education, in the workforce, and in leadership is far from over. This is not just a policy debate; it is a defining moment for our values as a nation.

At USC Upstate, we have seen the ripple effect of opportunity. We have witnessed

women — many the first in their families to attend college — step into leadership, start businesses, and become educators, healthcare providers, and advocates. Their success is not just personal; it reshapes families, strengthens communities, and creates pathways for those who follow.

The question before us now is not whether we should invest in the education of women and girls — it is whether we are willing to risk the cost of failing to do so.

I often think about what my mother could have achieved had she been given the same opportunities as the women who now walk our campus. But she never dwelled on what she lost. Instead, she made sure I understood what was possible. That is our task today — to not lament the barriers, but to dismantle them, and to build a future where the education of women is not questioned but celebrated.

Because when we educate women, we don't just change individual lives — we change the world.

At USC Upstate, we will continue to champion our women students, faculty, and researchers. We will continue to tell the stories of mothers like mine — women whose sacrifices paved the way for future generations. And we will remind policymakers that when we invest in women's education, we invest in the prosperity of an entire nation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor