



August 19, 2025

It's that time again: It's time to start a new school year. And this is, in some ways, a very different kind of school year than we've experienced before. Two developments in particular make 2025–2026 unique: the rapid growth of artificial intelligence, and recent legislation that affects many students before they've even set foot on our campus.

Growing up on a small farm in Mississippi, I learned that the line between stability and struggle can be thin. When my older brother became seriously ill and my father lost his job, our family — despite working hard — needed public assistance to get by. That experience shaped my understanding of how economic forces far beyond a child's control can determine educational opportunity.

The new “Big Beautiful Bill Act” will make these challenges more acute. By reducing funding for programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, millions of children could lose access to health care and food security, two essentials that form the foundation for academic success. These changes will inevitably ripple through our K–12 systems and into higher education, increasing the barriers for those already facing the steepest climbs.

At USC Upstate, we are committed to closing those gaps through dual enrollment opportunities, targeted student support, and strong partnerships with schools and communities. We must ensure that a student's potential is not determined by their zip code or income.

At the same time, artificial intelligence is reshaping the landscape of education and work. Tools like ChatGPT can help personalize learning and automate certain tasks, but they also raise questions of ethics, bias, environmental impact, and access.



In a world where 75% of companies are expected to adopt AI technologies within five years, the real risk is not losing jobs to AI — but losing them to those who know how to use it effectively and responsibly.

That is why we are integrating AI literacy across disciplines, supporting faculty in adopting these tools thoughtfully, and working to ensure that every student can navigate the opportunities and challenges AI presents.

This year will be filled with promise, but also with responsibility. We have the chance to not only adapt to a changing world, but to shape it, ensuring that innovation serves the cause of equity, and that education remains the most powerful engine for hope.

I look forward to working with you to navigate the challenges and celebrate the successes with energy, purpose, and a shared commitment to each other's success.

Sincerely,

Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor