



February 19, 2026

Leadership is often described as the ability to bring people together through shared purpose, alignment, and commitment. But in moments like the ones we are living through, I believe leadership demands something even more essential: courage.

February invites us to reflect through the lens of Black History Month, a time to honor the contributions and resilience of Black Americans while considering the enduring lessons that history offers us today. Among those lessons is this: Progress has never come from fear. It has always required courage to see each other clearly, to challenge assumptions, and to lead with empathy rather than division.

Early in my career, I moved from the South to Washington state. As a Black man raised and educated in the South, my understanding of marginalization had been shaped by the racial paradigms most familiar to me. I expected to encounter injustice that looked a certain way.

In Washington I encountered communities with experiences of marginalization that were rooted in very different histories. These were indigenous peoples, Mexican-American families, Ukrainian and Russian immigrants, and Asian communities. Their challenges were shaped by forces I had not fully understood before. That experience forced me to confront the limits of my own perspective. It challenged me to grow, and it made me a better leader.

It also prompted me to reflect on the foundation of my leadership. Was I leading from fear or from courage?

Fear encourages us to see one another as threats. Courage asks us to recognize each other's full humanity.

We are living in a time when fear is easy to come by. There is fear of change, fear of difference, and fear fueled by uncertainty, rapid transformation, and deeply held disagreements. In such a climate, the temptation is to retreat, harden positions, and reduce one another to labels.

But leadership rooted in fear is fragile. It fractures trust and weakens community.

Courage, by contrast, is grounded in enduring values. For me, those values are simple: Treat others as you would want to be treated and love your neighbor as yourself. Leading with courage does not require abandoning conviction. It means maintaining our convictions with empathy, listening without losing ourselves, and standing firm without closing our hearts.

When I returned to the South, my broader understanding of human experience changed how I saw familiar challenges. It allowed me to recognize injustice more clearly, advocate more effectively, and lead more inclusively.

Our university, like our nation, is a mosaic of backgrounds, stories, and perspectives. Educating in such a community requires more than confidence in what we believe; it requires courage in how we engage with each other.

Each day, we face choices. Will we react, or will we reflect? Will we assume the worst, or seek understanding?

This is not easy work. But as we honor Black History Month and navigate uncertainty in our world, I am convinced that choosing courage is the only path that leads to stronger institutions, deeper learning, and a more humane future.

Thank you for the ways you show up for one another and for this university. Together, let's continue to lead with courage and compassion.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Bennie L. Harris signature
Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor