



February 1, 2023

Dear campus community,

Black History Month provides us all with the opportunity to celebrate the triumphs, acknowledge the contributions, and reflect on the difficulties faced by the Black community at USC Upstate, in Spartanburg, in our state, across the country, and around the world.

As I think about all of this, a particular quote — by Marian Wright Edelman, civil rights activist and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund — comes to mind:

“Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it.”

Indeed, education plays a crucial role — not only for teaching Black history, but also for making it. Here at USC Upstate, we set the stage for students and faculty of color to reach their greatest heights. We serve as a place for educational engagement. We create a culture of civil discourse. We open the door to progressive thought. And, in alignment with my personal mission, we inspire and develop people who will change the world.

Our Center for African American Studies, for example, invites leading scholars in African-American studies to USC Upstate to discuss their recent work and future direction of the discipline in a “State of the Field Address.” The Center also offers a “Classroom to Career” program that connects scholars to internships and career opportunities with community organizations that focus on the Black experience.

One such organization is the Racial Equity and Economic Mobility (REEM) Commission, which was formed in the summer of 2020 to convene around matters of racial inequity, social justice, and disparities that impact the Black community in Greenville County. Another opportunity for student engagement comes from the Echo Project in Laurens, SC. The Echo Project took a theater that was a Ku Klux Klan hub and transformed it into a center for diversity and reconciliation.

We also maintain a strong partnership with the NAACP. Our student chapter is award-winning, and USC Upstate hosts the NAACP Black History Bowl, an oratorical competition that has been expanded to include a digital poster competition that gives middle school and high school students the opportunity express their creativity and build design skills.

Additionally, the Center for African American Studies has created a new lecture series called, “The Black Carolina,” featuring new academic research on the Black experience in South Carolina. And our faculty are subject matter experts in this area, such as USC Upstate Faculty Senate Chair Dr. Carmen Harris, professor of history, who participated in a panel discussion for the SCETV/PBS screening of “Making Black America: Through the Grapevine.” The docuseries from renowned scholar Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. chronicles the vast networks and organizations created by and for Black people.

This connection, commitment, and community-building at USC Upstate allows everyone, no matter their race or ethnicity, the opportunity to better understand that Black history is American history — and that a shared understanding of what has come before can help us do better as we move forward.

We are embodying the spirit of Marian Wright Edelman's words during Black History Month and every month: We are improving the lives of others and leaving our community and world better than we found it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Dr. Bennie L. Harris
Chancellor