



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

James T. Harris III '88g



To James T. Harris III for his support of higher education and for his role in bridging Widener University with its community.

James Harris III loves a challenge. When he became president of Widener University in 2002, he knew his challenge would be helping this Philadelphia-area institution engage with the poverty- and crime-ridden city of Chester that surrounds it. The magnitude of this proposition hit home his first day as president, when administrators showed him plans to turn the freshman quad into a gated community. “We were basically going to fence ourselves in,” he said.

Instead, Harris led the university in the opposite direction. Widener partnered with community leaders on projects including a business incubator, a college access council, and the first university-affiliated charter school in Pennsylvania. Today, Widener has been ranked 19th by *Newsweek* and *The Daily Beast* among U.S. service schools; has been named to the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll every year since 2006; and was among the first U.S. universities classified as “community engagement institutions” by the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching.

“We can be no better in the long run as a university than our community,” Harris said. “Widener and Chester are inextricably bound and it would be disingenuous to ask our students to be responsible citizens if the university is not imbued with that same sense of commitment.”

Harris’s background parallels that of many Widener students, approximately 40 percent of whom are Pell Grant eligible. He grew up in an industrial town—Fostoria, Ohio—which has an economy tied to the automotive industry. His parents both worked in factories, and he was the first in his family to attend college, earning a bachelor’s degree from the University of Toledo, a master’s degree from Edinboro University, and a doctoral degree in higher education from Penn State.

“Penn State has had a profound impact on my life. I’m a better president and a better man because of my experience at Penn State,” he said. With then-President Bryce Jordan as a role model, Harris said he “developed the courage to consider becoming a university president.”

Following post-doctoral studies at Harvard University, Harris became president in 1994 of Defiance College in Defiance, Ohio. During his tenure, he established a service-learning program that drew

national attention. In 1999, the John Templeton Foundation named him one of the country’s top 50 character-building university presidents.

That reputation attracted the attention of Widener, which was struggling at the time in its relationship with the surrounding community. “Many people would steer away from that type of challenge,” Harris said. “I was drawn to it.”

With limited financial resources, Harris turned to partnerships to engage Widener with the community. The Widener Center for Violence Prevention opened in 2009 with leadership from the university and collaboration among more than 40 community partners. Harris brought together the presidents of five local colleges and universities (including Penn State Brandywine) to form the Chester Higher Education Council. Its initiatives include the College Access Center, which helps youths and adults gain access to higher education; the Small Business Development Center, which incubates more than two dozen businesses each year; and the development of a STEM-oriented high school.

The Widener Partnership Charter School, born in 2006, partners interdisciplinary teams of Widener

faculty members and graduate students to work with school children and their families to promote social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Now Harris is helping expand to other U.S. cities the concept of universities as anchor institutions. Chester is one of six pilot cities for the White House’s Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative.

In 2013, Harris co-authored *Academic Leadership and Governance of Higher Education: A Guide for Trustees, Leaders, and Aspiring Leaders of Two- and Four-Year Institutions*. The other three authors are Richard Dorman '80g, '90g; Robert Hendrickson; and Jason Lane '02g, '03g.

When Harris returned to Pennsylvania in 2002, he began volunteering his time and expertise at Penn State. He is a founder and past president of the Higher Education Program Alumni Council and served as a director of the College of Education Alumni Society.

Harris and his wife, Mary '85, are life members of the Penn State Alumni Association. They have two sons, Zachary and Braden.