

UPDATE to the Capacity and Preparatory Report University of Southern California September 2, 2008

INTRODUCTION

In October 2005, USC submitted to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) an Institutional Proposal (IP), which marked the start of its accreditation review process. The Proposal identified two thematic areas:

- Spanning Disciplinary and School Boundaries to Focus on Problems of Societal Significance
- Development of Learner-Centered Education

These areas correspond to two of four “strategic capabilities” identified in USC’s 2004 Strategic Plan, “USC’s Plan for Increasing Academic Excellence: Building Strategic Capabilities for the University of the 21st Century.” Interdisciplinary breadth and learner-centered education are key elements of USC’s core documents and part of our “educational DNA.” As we began the accreditation review process, it was only natural that these two themes would guide our presentation to WASC.

In December 2007, USC submitted to WASC its Capacity and Preparatory Report (CPR) which further developed these themes in terms of our efforts to enrich the educational environment. Interdisciplinary and learner-centered education means different things in different institutional contexts. USC has gone to great lengths to understand our particular contributions in these areas while taking into account the broader socio-historical context – a context characterized by greater diversity, growing internationalization, and rapid technological change. Recognizing the importance of this broader reality, our presentation to WASC also focuses on diversity, internationalization, and technology-enhanced learning.

INTERDISCIPLINARY AND LEARNER-CENTERED EDUCATION AT USC

Together, our Institutional Proposal and Capacity and Preparatory Report identify concrete ways to think about what interdisciplinary breadth and learner-centered education mean at USC. For our students, interdisciplinary and learner-centered education means opportunities to pursue multiple programs of study that combine breadth with depth, to become part of the arts and humanities culture on our campus and in Los Angeles and appreciate the importance of the arts and humanities across the academic spectrum, and to participate in academic culture beyond the classroom. For increasing numbers of our students, this takes the form of inquiry-based learning with faculty guidance, service learning in the community, immersion in global cultures (through study abroad and other initiatives), internships, and innovative uses of new technologies and critical reflection on their social impact.

For our faculty and professional staff, interdisciplinary and learner-centered education means developing new programs that cross disciplines, academic units, and departments, conducting fundamental and applied research that addresses societal needs, making innovative use of new technologies in education, and recognizing that all of us – faculty, academic advisors, and other professionals – are engaged in a collective mission of inspiring learning, that is, of “developing individuals and society as a whole by cultivating and enriching the human mind and spirit” (USC’s Role and Mission Statement).

In the short months since submitting our CPR, we have moved forward aggressively on several fronts. First, our 2008 report on progress under USC’s 2004 Strategic Plan has been approved, and the Provost just announced a process to develop the next Strategic Plan. Second, after a semester of review, reflection and reform, we made several changes to our program review process based on past experience, dialogue with faculty and deans, and careful evaluation. We began a second stage of program review in 2007 called UCAR II. We have conducted several program reviews under this new system, and we are pleased with the effect of the changes, although we continue to modify the process based on experience. Third, we launched an Advisement Database, which will increase greatly our service to students and improve retention and graduation rates, and an Interactive Audit Report system to allow students to weigh all their academic options before making final decisions about their degree objectives. Fourth, we continue searching for new ways to ensure that our programs in and outside the classroom are enhancing the learning experience for our students and instilling in them an intellectual curiosity and critical thinking capacity for lifelong learning. Finally, the university broke ground in May on construction of the new Ronald Tutor Campus Center. The Center promises to redefine our notions of community and will serve as a central gathering place for every current and prospective student, professor, staff member, alumnus, family member, and visitor to campus (<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/construction/>).

STRATEGIC PLANNING

USC is a research university with a liberal arts college and sixteen professional schools. Despite its broad academic scope and decentralization, the university has maintained a unity of mission, a concern for the individual student, and a very strong sense of community usually identified with the values of the *Trojan Family*. Strategic planning has become a vital means of ensuring campus wide dialogue to identify challenges and our strengths, to define a strategic direction, and to provide incentives for faculty, academic units, and our students to advance us toward a common vision. The Strategic Plan enjoys broad awareness across campus, is widely discussed, and guides administrative decision-making. The most recent Strategic Plan lists interdisciplinary breadth and learner-centered education as critical strategic capabilities. Beginning in the early 1990’s, we started on a path to insure our students’ access to every educational resource available on campus. Through university-wide discussions and several new initiatives, most notably the Renaissance Scholar program and a major revision of general education, we began a

process of breaking down barriers between academic units that might impede students from studying in multiple areas. Strategic planning guides our efforts.

Our first strategic plan was produced in 1994; the second in 2004. We are in the preliminary stages of embarking on a new strategic planning process that will build in part on our work in this accreditation cycle. In response to the recommendation of our 1998 WASC accreditation review, we completed four-year reports (in 1998 and in 2008, respectively) to transform the broad goals defined by each strategic plan into more detailed action points. Producing the 2004 Strategic Plan involved establishing a Strategic Planning Committee made up of leading faculty and deans, discussing initial drafts with about 200 faculty at several retreats, enlarging the original committee, and forming faculty subcommittees on key issues. A draft plan was then refined in response to faculty discussion and written feedback. Following this, the draft was circulated to the entire USC community and the Provost hosted a forum for open discussion. The final version was approved by the Board of Trustees on October 6, 2004.

This fall the Provost will release “A Report on the Fourth Year of Implementation.” An advance copy is attached (**Appendix 1**). This document also provides some helpful updates on our activities since the CPR was submitted to WASC. Currently, we are in the preliminary stages of laying the groundwork for the next strategic plan in 2014.

PROGRAM REVIEW

Based on the recommendation from our 1998 WASC accreditation review, the university instituted in 1999 a process for systematic on-going peer review of our academic units and programs. The purpose of program review is to foster academic excellence at all levels, raise quality, and provide guidance for administrative decisions in support of continual improvement.

The Provost, working in consultation with the appropriate deans, is responsible for scheduling the programs to be reviewed each year. Reviews may focus on individual departments, clusters of departments, schools, or interdisciplinary groups that cut across departmental or school lines. University reviews occur on a ten-year cycle.

The University Committee on Academic Review (UCAR) oversees the process of academic program review. UCAR is a permanent, standing university committee composed of senior faculty that provides oversight for all reviews and assesses the reports of the Review Committees before transmitting them to Provost. During the first wave of program review (UCAR I – 1999-2006), a total of 62 programs representing nearly every unit at USC were reviewed. Based on a self-study, a subcommittee of UCAR consulted with several stakeholders, including deans and department chairs, to revise procedures. The result was a second wave of program review which began in spring 2007 (UCAR II) – a total of 17 programs will have been reviewed by spring 2009.

As part of program review, a committee evaluates the mission and intellectual profile of the program, the stature and diversity of the faculty, the extent to which the unit contributes to interdisciplinary research and teaching, improvements that can be made with and without additional resources, and whether or not there are issues within the unit that constrain its effectiveness. A unit's self-study report includes assessment of learning outcomes and provides a basis for the review team's site visit. Self-study report guidelines request that the unit reflect substantively on and provide evidence of the quality of teaching, evaluation, and student learning including supporting data on quality indicators. The unit must provide an assessment of student learning and educational effectiveness including methods used to evaluate doctoral dissertations, master's theses, and other forms of student research and creative work; passage rates on professional entry examinations; Ph.D. placements over the past decade; other relevant learning assessments such as qualifying examinations and research projects; and student scholarship including honors theses, publications, grants, national and international awards, attendance at professional meetings, and participation in symposia.

Program review within the new UCAR II framework begins with the drafting of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the unit to be reviewed, the appropriate dean(s), and the Provost. The MOU includes the charge to the Review Committee; issues that the Provost, the Dean and the school or unit have identified as questions of particular importance for the unit under review; the composition of the Review Committee; and the time frame for the review. Review Committees include a combination of internal and external faculty. Each Review Committee consists of one or more senior members of the USC faculty and two or more external consultants who are prominent faculty members at their home universities.

The academic review process continues to be evaluated and modified to improve upon its effectiveness for academic planning. Recent modifications under consideration by the UCAR and the Provost include guidelines to assist the unit under review with formulating and structuring its formal response to the Review Committee's report.

RETENTION AND GRADUATION

It is noteworthy that at the time of our last WASC review in 1998, the 6-year graduation rate was reported as 64%. That rate now stands at 88% for the 2002 entering cohort, a remarkable improvement in ten years. We have committed ourselves to crossing the 90% threshold in the near future. Achieving success in this area begins with the quality of USC's incoming students. The success of USC's Office of Admission is unparalleled and has led to remarkable improvements described in our Capacity and Preparatory Report. We have seen increased student demand in recruitment which has translated into lower admit and higher yield rates. At the same time, we have achieved significant improvement in recruitment and enrollment of underrepresented minorities and first generation students. We have also increased the size of our international student population, establishing USC as the national leader in this area. Improvements in the quality of our incoming classes provide the foundation for future success.

Another foundation is having systems in place that ensure our students receive the support they need to be successful. A new web-based university-wide Advisement Database, developed by the Office of Undergraduate Programs, went into operation in August 2007. This system provides advisors with access to every undergraduate student's academic profile, course enrollment history, current enrollment, record of advisor interactions, academic review and program status, scholarship information, and academic status. It allows advisors to communicate easily with students via an email function and allows students to make appointments online. Advisors can also run reports on their students – for example, the number of students entering their fourth year who have not completed a general education or foreign language requirement. Training sessions offered by the Office of Undergraduate Programs are required of all university advisors, and, as system use has grown, advisor feedback has led to ongoing improvements to the system. Following the introduction of this new system, all academic units and departments were asked to produce multiyear course plans for their students. By the end of the fall 2008 semester, every USC undergraduate will have a course plan on file which can be viewed by the home departmental advisor as well as other advisors if a student decides to change or add to her/his program of study.

We have also added a new Interactive Audit Report function to our existing Student Academic Record System report (STARS). This new function will be made available to students this fall. It allows students to explore their academic alternatives in an interactive fashion. When students add or subtract hypothetical majors and minors, the Interactive Audit Report gives them a visual representation, including color-coded graphics, of the changes in their requirements and time to degree. The system allows students to save a list of courses they intend to complete in the future. Advisors can also view a student's record to help them develop their plans. The Interactive Audit Report empowers students to take greater ownership over their academic planning and facilitates having more meaningful discussions with their advisors. In the future, the Interactive Audit Report function will be directly accessible from the Advisement Database. We approach all these system enhancements as opportunities to help our students stay connected to USC, set and achieve their academic goals, and graduate on time.

LEARNING ASSESSMENT

The university is engaged in critical, ongoing campus-wide discussions on how best to assess learning. We are committed to learning assessment and believe we are building consensus around principles of assessment that will help improve our educational effectiveness and make us accountable to our community and the broader public. We are working to develop assessment strategies that respect the broad spectrum of academic programs and content areas offered at USC, work to find meaningful ways, both qualitative and quantitative, to understand the results of learning at numerous levels, value student and faculty time by not being overly intrusive and, as one faculty committee put it, do not “convert our curriculum into a social science research project.” Of course, the key is

not just to assess but to use what we learn to spark innovation and improve the richness and effectiveness of a USC education.

Key participants in this discussion include tenure and non-tenure track faculty, students, staff, and administrators. Our Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET) is a critical agent fostering discussion through sponsorship of forums and workshops, providing resources to encourage innovation in teaching, training teaching assistants, and recognizing outstanding classroom performance by faculty and graduate students. CET boasts an impressive and active array of Faculty Fellows, Teaching Assistant Fellows, and a newly-created Undergraduate Fellows group. The Teaching Assistant Fellows just launched a “TA wiki” (<http://uscta.wikidot.com/>) to provide new and continuing teachers a unique set of resources that covers topics such as grading, academic dishonesty, active teaching strategies, and more. The wiki is an added resource that provides useful insight into higher education pedagogy, so new TA’s do not have to reinvent the wheel, and it is a living document that can be modified by current TA fellows.

Another central agent for change is our Technology Enhanced Learning and Distance Learning group (TEL-DL) which helps faculty integrate technology into teaching practice, and provides a set of program metrics and assessment tools for measuring student learning outcomes and program efficacy. The University Committee on Academic Programs and Teaching (UCAPT) also plays a central role in evaluating strategies for enhancing learning across campus and shares with the USC community ways to validate educational effectiveness. This fall UCAPT will assess the many minor concentrations offered across the university. It will delineate their educational objectives, determine whether current minors are serving those objectives, suggest new directions for future minors, and examine the array of catalog rules for completion of minors.

ASSESSMENT STUDIES: Since completion of the Capacity and Preparatory Report, two important assessment studies have received Teagle Foundation grants that promise to further our efforts to assess learning outcomes. The first, entitled “Assessing Critical Thinking through Student Writing: An Academic Model of Accountability,” examines the development of student thinking as demonstrated through the change from the freshman year to the junior year in their ability to write clearly and analytically. Work has progressed through the first two stages and, with a significant grant from Teagle, can now proceed through the final stage of evaluating student papers assigned in freshman writing and upper-division advanced writing courses. We are pleased that this approach to assessment focuses on actual student work and that it is non-intrusive, taking up no additional class, student, or faculty time. Benefits from this study are already being felt with improvements to the undergraduate Writing Program – improvements which grew out of early findings and discussions of this assessment method.

The second study supported by Teagle assesses the learning outcomes of USC’s diversity requirement. Diversity requirements are part of the curriculum at 63% of all four-year colleges. According to research in this area, diversity courses make a significant contribution in reducing racial prejudice, but no previous study has attempted to address

what happens to students' understanding of the human conditions that create diversity or has examined the impact of diversity courses on broader student learning outcomes. The PI's of this study have already secured cooperation from several faculty who teach diversity courses to allow data collection beginning this fall. It is anticipated that the study will extend to several other institutions in the future.

REVIEW OF GENERAL EDUCATION: The university's current general education requirements are a vital part of the undergraduate curriculum, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to gain a range of knowledge before they delve deeply into majors and minors. Over the years, the university's general education curriculum has been periodically evaluated and revised. It underwent substantial revision in 1997 and a university-level review from within the College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences in 2005. This last review asked faculty who teach general education courses to define learning objectives, learning outcomes, and modes of assessment for their courses, which are posted online (http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general_studies/GE/). In order to ensure our general education program meets the objectives set out in our strategic plan and prepares our students to excel in an increasingly complex world, the Provost has asked for another examination of the program, appointing a university-wide committee to carefully review the curriculum. A copy of the Provost's announcement of the general education review is attached (**Appendix 2**).

Other assessment related news includes a plan to conduct an alumni survey. Also, our *Visions and Voices* program began in 2006 and provides students a rich and diverse array of events in the arts and humanities throughout the year. These events invite students to dialogue and interact with artists, writers, professors and special guests and we consider it an area ripe for assessment. Finally we have begun discussions with our Career Planning and Placement Center to access their employer surveys for the perspectives of those who work with our graduates.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN ASSESSMENT

Since taking office in 2005 Provost C. L. Max Nikias has put in place several important educational initiatives. These include the USC Arts and Humanities initiative, the establishment of the Discovery Scholars and Global Scholars programs, and the Technology Enhanced Learning–Distance Learning (TEL-DL) initiative. With these changes, the singular features that make a USC degree distinctive have come into focus – these could be considered the *USC Signature*.

Are these signature features taking root in our students' minds and impacting their educational choices. And will they have a positive impact on learning. Early signs are that students have heard the call, are taking full advantage of these new opportunities, and a new academic culture is taking root. What is the *USC Signature*?

- Belief in the intellectual value of interdisciplinary breadth combined with genuine depth – in the form of students combining several programs of study that are far

apart on the academic spectrum. This represents a long-established core value at USC represented by the Renaissance Scholar model of education.

- Desire to enjoy the full educational value of USC's excellence in the creative arts and the cultural riches of Los Angeles, through an ambitious slate of arts and humanities events that are accompanied by reflective and discussion components. This is the basis for the Arts and Humanities initiative and the wildly popular *Visions and Voices* program that sponsors performance events throughout the academic year.
- Aspiration to engage in inquiry-based learning as a transformative and often collaborative mode of learning. At USC, the importance of undergraduate research and original creative work is acknowledged in our new Discovery Scholars program. And in a range of special events that center on research including the Symposium for Scholarly and Creative Work for continuing students, the Thematic Option Research Conference for new students, and other school-based conferences and symposia across our campus that support undergraduate research.
- Openness to becoming informed world citizens capable of leading in a globalized environment, able to celebrate the gift of national and international diversity on campus and in study-abroad programs, and eager to participate in new forms of learning that arise at the crossroads of cultures. Our new Global Scholars program promotes these ideals.
- Commitment to helping others in the form of service learning in the community – as we often see in Los Angeles, the global and the local intersect. The university has a long record of community service through the Joint Educational Program (JEP), the Family of Five Schools, and the Good Neighbors Campaign. Our engagement with the community gained national recognition in 2000 with the naming of USC as “college of the year” by Time Magazine and the Princeton Review.
- Awareness of the social impact of technology, particularly as a force expanding modes of literacy to what we call enhanced or multimedia literacy and as represented by our Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML). We have expanded multimedia literacy into our core curriculum and are engaged in continuing evaluation of this method and others that will provide our students literacy in the many means of communication in a 21st Century world.

We want to examine the impact of these changes on our academic culture. Student work and participation in these programs are likely to provide compelling evidence of student learning. Many of these programs collect, review, and display student work, ask participants to reflect on their experiences, and conduct follow-up surveys. As we begin to tap these data sources, what we learn can be used to improve educational effectiveness and to spread word to prospective and current students, to our peers, and to the broader society about the distinctive features of the *USC Signature*.