

REPORT OF THE WASC VISITING TEAM

SPECIAL VISIT

To the University of Southern California

November 19-21, 2014

Team Roster

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The team evaluated the institution under the 2013 WASC Senior College and University Commission Standards of Accreditation and prepared this report containing its collective evaluation for consideration and action by the institution and by the WASC Senior College and University Commission.

The formal action concerning the institution's status is taken by the Commission and is described in a letter from the Commission to the institution. This report and the Commission letter are made available to the public by publication on the WSCUC website.

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SECTION I – OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

A. Description of Institution and Visit

The University of Southern California (USC) is a private, Ph.D.-granting, research institution located in Los Angeles, California. As the state's oldest private research university and for its first half-century the only university located in southern California, USC has an historic and current commitment to "serving the public interest in a culturally diverse context." Today, USC is home to internationally recognized research, arts, and professional schools.

With an undergraduate enrollment of just over 18,500 students and a total enrollment of just over 41,000, USC has a diverse student body that reflects its commitments both to its immediate location in one of the most diverse cities in the world and to becoming a global university. In 2013-14, it had more international students than any other U.S. university, at just under 8,000. The university has two main campuses in Los Angeles: the 226-acre University Park Campus convenient to downtown L.A., and the Health Sciences Campus a few miles away. In addition, USC has capitalized on its position on the Pacific Rim, and pioneered off-site campuses in Shanghai, China and Honolulu, Hawaii. The institution houses 21 different schools and colleges.

USC's accreditation was reaffirmed by the Commission in 2010, with its next comprehensive review to occur in 2020. In the last review, the Commission commended the university for its responsiveness to past Commission recommendations; for the array of initiatives encouraging interdisciplinary learning and that position USC as a global university; insuring the high quality of off-campus and distance learning initiatives; developing programs to enhance advising and support, particularly for first-generation college students; and for undertaking significant research studies to document the role of core courses in developing students' critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills. The Commission also commended the university for its high graduation rate, noting not only that the 6-year rate increased dramatically from 1998 to 2010 but also that faculty and staff are "enthusiastic about reaching for an even higher target."

The Commission identified several areas in which it asked USC to continue its work. Formal program review at the undergraduate level was new in 2010, and so the team at that time was not able to evaluate that process. The team also noted that there seemed to be disparities in the 6-year graduation rate by ethnic group, and urged USC to identify strategies for supporting the groups of students who appear to struggle more than the norm. Finally, the Commission asked the university to examine its current approach to general education in concert with majors, minors, and electives, to investigate whether it was achieving its goal of providing for students' breadth of learning.

The current Special Visit therefore targets:

- undergraduate program review and assessment of student learning;

- student success, with specific reference to disaggregated data for subpopulations so that specific issues could be identified and addressed; and
- interdisciplinary learning and general education.

B. Quality of the Special Visit Report and Supporting Evidence

The team commends USC for the quality of the institutional report, its responsiveness to the issues identified in the 2010 EER Review, and the process by which the issues have been investigated. The development of the report was clearly a collaborative process, with multiple stakeholders involved. The team met with the WASC Accreditation Task Force, which includes faculty and staff from Student Affairs, Enrollment Services, the School of Business, the Viterbi School of Engineering, and the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, as well as the Office of the Provost. Task Force members took the lead on the issues in their respective areas, meeting as a group multiple times per semester in order to see the larger picture as it emerged. The Task Force has been involved throughout the process. (CFRs 1.8, 4.3, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7)

In its response to the EER recommendations, USC identified key questions and developed thoughtful processes through which to investigate or pursue them. The report documents, for example, the continuation of the critical thinking and writing study. The 2009 study examined the writing of first-year students and juniors, documenting strides in critical thinking that appear to occur over the course of a USC education. The follow-up study replicated that assessment with the 2009 first-year students in their junior year, finding comparable results. The results of this study have already been used to shift curriculum and pedagogy within the Writing Program. In the case of general education review, the university quickly came to the conclusion that it wanted to expand the number and range of its breadth requirements. It engaged in a collaborative and deliberative process that will result in a new general education plan to be rolled out in 2015. Undergraduate program review now seems well-established at the university, with a clear cycle of units undergoing review. The report disaggregates student success data in such a way that USC can identify populations in need of additional support. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.7, 2.10, 2.14, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4)

In addition, USC is engaged in developing new programs across and between units at the institution. These range from new programs—like that in Narrative Studies, which is housed in the Dornsife College but includes courses offered in the schools of Dramatic Arts, Music, Art and Design, and Cinematic Arts; to interdisciplinary capstone courses—like that taught in the Viterbi School of Engineering that bring design, engineering, and marketing students together to develop projects. The new World Bachelor in Business is another example of such innovative thinking, in this case across institutions and continents. It's clear that the revision of general education, the development and implementation of program review, and the focus on student success and retention have all been processes that involved multiple stakeholders and constituencies. In addition, these processes have been undertaken in thoughtful, deliberative, and intellectually substantive ways. These processes are well documented in the report, with clear narratives as well as detailed supporting documents. (CFRs 2.8, 3.7, 3.10)

C. Description of the Team Review Process

In advance of the site visit, the team conducted two conference calls. The first, on October 14, 2014, confirmed areas of responsibility for the different members of the team and set the process for the visit and drafting the report. In advance of the second conference call, on October 30, the team reviewed the report and circulated notes. During the second conference call, the team evaluated the report and identified areas of inquiry. The team also noted some supplemental materials to request from the institution and some changes to the proposed visit schedule. These materials were largely supplied more than a week in advance of the site visit; the institution generously provided additional materials at the time of the visit, both in response to follow-up requests and to acquaint the team with specific programs and developments. USC was entirely receptive to requests for changes to the visit schedule.

Over the course of the visit, the team met with numerous faculty committees and groups. The standing or ad hoc committees included: the WASC Accreditation Task Force, the University Committee on Curriculum, the Committee on Strategic Transformation, the Retention and Graduation Task Force, and the University Committee on Academic Review. In addition, the team met with faculty from Arts and Engineering, to discuss capstone courses; faculty from the Writing Program; faculty and administrators centrally involved in the revision of General Education, and faculty and administration involved in the new World Bachelor in Business. The team also met with the president, the provost, and the executive vice provost (who will become interim provost on December 1, 2014). The array of faculty, staff, and administrators was impressive and provided a comprehensive view of the work USC is doing.

SECTION II – TEAM ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUES

A. Continuing Development of Assessment and Program Review

Undergraduate Program Review

In the March 2011 letter, the Commission reaffirmed USC's accreditation but requested a Special Visit for Fall 2014 to review progress in the "continuing Development of Assessment and Program Review." The Commission recommended that USC continue "developing effective methods and using the results to improve learning" and "incorporating assessment of student learning into program review, refining the process as needed and proceeding to complete more reviews."

In the past four years, USC has developed specific guidelines for Undergraduate Program Review (UPR). The process was developed with significant participation and consultation by key campus stakeholders including the Academic Senate, the University Accreditation Committee, the Committee on Academic Policies and Procedures, several deans, the registrar, and the Provost Cabinet and reported to the Provost Council. The Guidelines were approved by the Provost in March 2010.

Based on guidance in the WSCUC letter, the campus focused on reviews in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences , in part because professional programs in the other schools already undergo specialized accreditation reviews. A specific internal process based on the guidelines was developed by Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. The process requires a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the director/chair of the program/department and the cognizant dean that addresses a process for selecting reviewers, definition of topics for a self study, etc. Institutional data are supplied to the department and departments appear to make good use of institutional data and metrics to identify issues, establish priorities and consider changes to curriculum, student support and co-curricular activities. The review team consisting of at least one internal and one or two external reviewers examines the academic vision and goals of the program, the curricular content and structure, faculty quality as well as teaching quality and effectiveness, the student experience/student engagement including outcomes, success, support and any other issues identified in the MOU.

At the completion of the review itself, the department or program prepares an integrated implementation plan to be carried out over five years. Resources are reallocated to achieve priorities or new resources are allocated. Progress is reviewed annually. Review outcomes and progress are used by deans to allocate resources. The campus began the review process for each of its majors in 2010, reviewing three to four departments or programs a year. The process was assessed in 2012 and modified based on the first two years of experience. The cycle will end in 2019 and then start again. (CFRs 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, 4.1-4.7)

At the campus level, the University Committee on Program Review oversees graduate program review and reports to the Provost. The Provost has asked that undergraduate reviews be reported to this committee and that feedback be reported to the Provost. Review outcomes are discussed annually by the Provost with the deans. The team notes that issues of resource allocation and impact of undergraduate and graduate needs are not aligned in the review process but rather are adjudicated between the provost, dean and department. It may be advisable at the end of the next cycle of reviews (the end of UCAR3 for graduate programs) that the campus consider how to better align undergraduate and graduate reviews. (CFRs 2.1, 2.4 2.7,4.1-4.7)

The review process as described in the USC report, and documented in the appendices, appears to be thorough and comprehensive. The report includes three examples of program reviews (Earth Sciences, International Relations and the Language Center), all of which document and demonstrate the thoughtful process described above. During the Special Visit, both faculty and administrators reported enthusiasm for the value of the undergraduate program review process. The faculty in particular appreciated the chance to discuss curricular issues and ideas with experts from outside USC. They indicated that the receipt of institutional data was also appreciated, but suggested that a deeper conversation about the data, how it is analyzed, and the gathering of additional types of data (such as exit interviews of seniors) would also be helpful. Faculty also indicated that the follow-up provided by the Associate Dean for Academic Programs was deemed very valuable both for keeping departments on track and for helping find solutions to successfully implement the outcomes.

Impacts in departments ranged from adjustments in staff advisors to the development of new interdisciplinary majors or minors that would attract more students. In some cases, GE courses in the department were revised to be more thematic and interesting to students. These were developed to also incorporate the learning objectives in the major. Some departments have made a more comprehensive effort to make undergraduate students part of the intellectual community with speaker series and special events. One department had faculty that had long wanted to make changes in curriculum but had been met with resistance; the alumni data gathered in the self-assessment stage of program review indicated a real problem for graduates because they lacked certain skills. The evidence from the review helped drive essential change in the major course of study.

In the case of the language center, the review process helped the program create a crisper and more efficient set of strategic priorities. In addition, it encouraged them to review national trends and standards to set realistic expectations of what students can accomplish in each language at the end of two or four years. In addition, the review helped drive resources to support professional development of the non-tenure-track faculty in language pedagogy and testing and assessment for proficiency.

Overall, the team noted that while reviews in some cases resulted in new resources—such as new staff advisors or faculty lines (tenure track and or non-tenure track)—other changes were effected by assessing the curriculum or advising strategies and reprioritizing existing resources as a result. In addition, departments recognized that the curriculum needs constant evaluation so that it can adopt new tools or approaches as they are developed or as fields change.

Assessment of Student Learning

The review process has been a catalyst for faculty discussions about curriculum and pedagogical approaches. USC indicates that they “prefer assessments that illuminate student learning; those that help us understand not only where we stand but how to improve.” Assessment is not to certify student learning: that process culminates in the conferral of a degree, based on performance certified at the completion of each course that a student earns credit for. They identify three principles that drive their assessment philosophy and undertaking:

- assessment is to discern effectiveness and quality in the educational process;
- the assessment process is faculty driven; and
- results and findings are shared with the purpose of adjusting pedagogy, revising curricula, and strengthening student support.

In its report, USC describes three examples of assessment practice. The first is the major effort to assess student development in writing and critical thinking, which will be discussed more fully below. The outcomes of this ongoing study have been applied in the development of the GE curriculum, particularly, in the overall design of the small freshmen seminars that each student will take to fulfill at least one GE requirement. These are expected to be writing intensive and to

focus on critical thinking skills. This application represents institutional learning at its best. (CFRs 2.2-2.6)

A second example discusses the role of summative or capstone projects used extensively in the Viterbi School of Engineering and in the arts schools. In the arts, the capstones provide an opportunity for performance and practice of the profession. For example, in music, the recital capstone is the summation of all their learning, demonstrating what they need to do professionally, and the culmination of the development of their own artistic identity. In the popular music program, seniors do a year-long project that is expected to be a synthesis of their education and self directed self-initiated project. These projects take many forms—a complete performance tour, a multimedia recording, video games—all designed to help students use the capstone as a pivot into the professional world. In cinematic arts, the capstone is around a class in which there are three-four collaborative projects, each with about 15 students working with faculty, that culminate in a First Look: first film, first pitch (film or television pilot) presented to an industry panel. The faculty reported how these capstone experiences are evaluated both in terms of the student performance but also how the results are used to evaluate and change the curriculum itself.

In Engineering, the capstones courses are similarly outcome-intensive and the faculty mine these deeply for feedback into the curriculum. The projects range from interdisciplinary teams that include students from business and fine arts to develop a product. In others, the project is more research-based, culminating in an oral presentation and a final written technical report. Other projects engage a client for whom the final product is designed.

Outside of the arts schools and engineering, capstones are less common. As part of the program review process, some liberal arts departments are wrestling with what a capstone means in a particular major or discipline and are moving to implement such a summative experience for their students. It might be valuable to have the engineering and arts programs share their philosophies and approaches to capstone experiences with departments considering such a development. (CFRs 2.1, 2.3, 2.5, 2.6, 2.9, 2.10)

The third is the assessment of their on-line graduate and professional education programs where strategies to assess effectiveness are imbedded in the programs from their inception. The team did not review these as extensively in this visit since USC has received fast track approval from WSCUC for its on-line offerings and is clearly using these assessments as part of their programs.

It is clear from the report and evidence submitted, and confirmed by the visit, that USC is serious about its commitment to evaluation and revision of the curriculum and the student experience through a process of program reviews and its evolving assessment strategies and practices. The team sees creativity, commitment and engagement across a broad range of faculty and units and encourages USC to continue on the path they have defined.

B. Studying Interdisciplinary Learning: General Education and Minors

Revising General Education

The Commission's recommendation in 2010 that USC examine its requirements for General Education (GE) catalyzed the university to substantially revise that system. These revisions expand the breadth requirements in ways that take advantage of the university's extensive professional and arts schools. The process has been collaborative and deliberative in manner and pacing, enlisting multiple faculty committees as well as other stakeholders. The initial process extended over the course of two years, involving two iterations of a faculty committee with overlap in membership. At points during both years, the categories for GE and then the student learning objectives were made available to the USC community for comment and discussion. Over 50 faculty commented, as well as many students and staff. (It was reported that over 300 pages of comments were received and reviewed.) It was also helpful to find a direct tie between the university's strategic plan, which emphasizes a global perspective, with the content of the GE requirements. Implementation is scheduled for fall, 2015. Multiple groups of both administrators and faculty expressed confidence in the oversight and implementation structures put in place.

The team endorses the university's expansion of GE requirements from six to eight courses. The new requirements raise the total number GE units from 32 to 40, a 25% increase. USC is expanding the number of GE requirements by adding arts (1 course) and quantitative reasoning (1 course). This augments the existing requirements in humanistic inquiry (2 courses), social analysis (2 courses) and life and physical sciences (2 courses). An additional 2 courses in global perspectives (traditions and historical foundations; citizenship in global era) are satisfied as an overlay requirement, and the writing requirement (2 courses) is maintained.

Another aspect of the new requirements was that they extended the ability to teach GE courses to faculty in their 12 professional schools including: engineering, medicine, architecture and others. This is a significant step, expanding the number of faculty with exposure to undergraduate teaching and potentially exposing the students to fields of study that they had not previously considered. The new GE requirements are thus a good strategy to increase cross-disciplinary study, especially at the beginning stages of a student's program of study. Another feature of the new GE requirements is that many of the courses are to be taught in a seminar format with no more than 19 students per course. This brings a small college experience to a large research university, and reveals a deep commitment on the part of the administration to undergraduate education, given the substantial investment in faculty time that this will entail. (CFRs 1.1, 2.1, 2.5, 3.1, 3.7)

Assessing Critical Thinking

The writing and critical thinking study initially undertaken in 2009 with grant funding from the Teagle and Spencer Foundations is an exemplary instance of program research and institutional learning. The initial study worked with established rubrics for evaluating critical

thinking, and trained writing program faculty to evaluate samples of student writing from both WRIT 140 (the required first-year writing course) and WRIT 340 (the required junior-year writing course), in order to understand what kinds of gains in critical thinking students made over their time at the university, as evidenced in their writing.

This study demonstrated that students made significant gains from first to junior year, but also raised pedagogical and curricular questions for the writing program about the emphasis of its first-year course. One of the significant findings of the study—which corresponds to research in the field—is that assignment design matters. In other words, the assignments students are given guide the kind of thinking they will do in response. In “Quantifying Learning in Critical Thinking” (*The Journal of General Education* 62.2-3 [2013]: 160-203), the principal investigators for the study (the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and the Director of the Writing Program) describe initial pedagogical shifts that were made to WRIT 140, particularly to the final assignment. These pedagogical changes sought 1) to shift student attention from the delivery of information to its analysis and evaluation and 2) to focus student attention on *what* they had learned in the first-year writing course, since education research has demonstrated the importance of metacognitive awareness in learning transfer.

Since that time, the first-year writing course has been further altered as a result of other curricular changes. The move from WRIT 140, which was coupled with the Social Issues GE requirement, to WRIT 150, a theme-based, critical thinking-focused writing course, has been directly informed by the critical thinking study. In particular, WRIT 150 “encourages students to apply academic concepts in the exploration of issues relevant to themselves and their generation” (<http://dornsife.usc.edu/writing-150/>). Students develop expertise over the course of the semester, giving them the knowledge and confidence they need to participate actively in academic and cultural conversations. Pedagogically, assignments consistently foster critical, analytic engagement with the relevant questions and topics; the culminating in-class reflective assignment provides an occasion for students to develop the metacognitive awareness of their development over the course of the semester that research has shown fosters transfer of learning between contexts. (CFRs 2.4, 4.3-4.5)

Exploring Interdisciplinary Learning

As mentioned earlier, the changes in GE requirements soon to be enacted by USC will have a positive impact on the exposure of undergraduates to disciplines outside their major field of study. The team expects that this will ensure a diverse education for USC students while still allowing them sufficient room in their programs to pursue both a major and a minor, should they so choose.

There are several other efforts either already in place or being separately undertaken by USC to encourage interdisciplinary learning. One is the use of capstone projects, currently required of students primarily in the arts and engineering. These projects naturally lend themselves to interdisciplinary approaches: an engineering design project may involve product design, and market analysis as well as the hardware and software needed for implementation. They also

provide appropriate culminating experiences by providing occasions for students to synthesize knowledge and intellectual practices developed over their time at USC. In addition, these capstones all provide occasions for students to make their learning visible and interesting to audiences beyond those of course professors—they are pivotal moments, when students take their classroom learning and put it into practice in the world. USC has recognized these capstones as a model for enhancing the level of interdisciplinary study across the entire campus, and the team applauds their efforts to broaden the use of capstones in fields outside the arts and engineering.

In addition, USC has recently developed a number of creative interdisciplinary majors, minors, and degree programs. These build alliances and guide students through fields of study across not just departments but schools. For example, the includes additional coursework in the Schools of Cinematic Arts, Art and Design, Dramatic Arts, and Music. In addition, students in Narrative Studies bring together critical and creative course work. The interdisciplinary minor, Resistance to Genocide, incorporates not only courses from Politics, International Relations, and History but also Music, English, and Psychology. Finally, the new World Bachelor in Business has built a program across institutions and continents, as USC works with its partners in Hong Kong and Italy to provide students with a coherent, integrated, and fully international undergraduate business education. (CFRs 2.5, 2.8)

Interdisciplinary courses can be challenging to mount and make known to students. For example, there can be technical barriers to cross-listing, and it can be difficult to allocate resources for courses that need to be co-taught by faculty from different departments or schools. The team recommends that USC continue to encourage these types of courses and to explore ways to remove obstacles in the way of their development.

C. Promoting Student Success

The 2011 Commission Action Letter stated, “While the overall six-year undergraduate graduation rate is high (89%), some disparities appear to exist by ethnic group. The Commission recommends that USC examine more closely disaggregated data to identify possible disparities in performance among various subpopulations, seek to understand these disparities, and explore strategies that could improve the rates in areas identified. In addition, the Commission recommends that USC compare its graduation and retention rates to other appropriate institutions in order to develop a challenging yet reasonable target for further improvement.” In the 2010 Report by the WASC Visiting Team, the team commended USC on the progress in raising the overall six-year graduation rate from 70 percent in 1998 to 89 percent in 2010. That team also suggested that USC “consider comparing retention and graduation rates against a more challenging benchmark group than the AAU as a whole,” and try to understand the data for disaggregated subpopulations, including international students. (CFRs 1.2, 2.6, 2.10, 4.4)

Overall USC is to be commended for the attention that they have placed on increasing the graduation rates for all students on campus. In responding to the suggestions from the prior

visit, the special visit materials included comparative 4-, 6-, and 8-year graduation rates (based on IPEDS data) for the 25 private research universities that are a part of the Association of American Universities (as compared with all of the AAU universities that had been previously used by USC). The data set was for students who entered in 2003 and showed that USC's graduation rates were slightly lower than the AAU group (USC's 4-, 6-, and 8-year graduation rates were 72%, 88%, and 89%; the averages across the AAU group were 84%, 92%, and 93%). However as noted in USC's institutional report, USC's graduation rates have continued to increase over time and the 6-year graduation rate 91% in 2013, which is close to the average AAU rate.

The aggregated AAU data for private universities may not provide much additional insight to USC; however, the comparison did highlight one of the key differences between the undergraduate student body at USC and student populations at private AAU universities. The USC fall-term graduation rate cohort was 63% of the total number of undergraduate students entering USC for the first time (the data corresponded to students entering in the 2005-06 academic year). For the average across the other private AAU universities, fall-term freshmen were 88% of the total number of entering students. Hence, USC has significantly more transfer students compared with peer institutions. In addition to these fall term transfer students, USC also has spring-term freshmen and spring-term transfer students. In recent years, students who entered as first-time, fall-term freshmen are approximately 50-60% of the undergraduate student population. Hence, USC should be looking beyond the standard 6-year graduation rates for fall-term freshmen to quantify the success of all of their students. (CFR 1.2, 2.10, 2.14)

More than half of the students who transfer to USC come from community colleges. Many of the transfer students are the first in their families to attend college, or are students who need considerable financial aid to attend USC. USC's strategic vision includes a section on USC's dedication to ensuring that students from all backgrounds have access to their programs; the vision states that their "commitment to transfers is a commitment to society as a whole." Hence, USC should be commended in their efforts to diversify the student body by attracting and retaining talented transfer students. With this commitment, it seems even more important for USC to highlight the success of these students by publishing graduation rates and success stories on their web pages and campus publications. The graduation rates for students who transfer into USC and for first-time students entering in spring term were not found on the open USC web pages. (CFRs 1.2, 1.4, 1.6)

The team heard about extensive efforts to integrate transfer students into the life of USC, including specific orientation sessions for transfer students and for students entering in the spring term. As USC embarks on introducing a new GE program, the USC staff indicated that they are making efforts in communicating these upcoming changes with local community colleges and prospective transfer students. These efforts, along with academic advising after the students arrive at USC, will be important for transfer students, especially since these students typically take additional time to complete their degree.

The institutional report that USC prepared for the Special Visit highlighted the work of the Retention and Graduation Task Force, which was put in place in 2006; this group is responsible for planning initiatives, distributing data to the units, and monitoring progress to degree of all undergraduates. The Task Force helped to support student retention through other initiatives such as the advisement data base; the data base has been an effective mechanism for students and their advisors to plan and check academic progress and it allows the Office of Undergraduate Programs to monitor and support the communication between students and their advisors. The team was impressed with the dedication and commitment of the Undergraduate Program staff in their efforts to communicate with the hundreds of students each quarter who fail to register for the next semester in a timely fashion.

As suggested in the prior report, USC provided disaggregated data for fall cohorts from 2003-2007 (as a note, there was no comparative data from peer institutions). Over this 5-year time span, the 6-year graduation rates were somewhat lower for Black/African American students than for the other subpopulations (American Indian, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, White, international students). Although not provided, the USC staff indicated that they examine the graduation data for students in other subpopulations, such as first-generation to college, low income and Pell grant students, academic fields, and athletes. The team suggests that the disaggregated graduation rates could be supplemented with the information that is gleaned from the efforts of the Undergraduate Program Office to track non-registering students. This combination of efforts between the Office of Institutional Research and the Undergraduate Programs could provide insight into the challenges and/or obstacles that may be experienced by certain demographic groups, such as USC's African American population, in reaching graduation. (CFRs 1.4, 2.10, 4.4)

SECTION III – FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the team was impressed by the highly positive input from faculty, staff, and administration about the institution's commitment to delivering a high quality education to a diverse population of students. It's clear that this is an institution committed to learning, innovation, and support for students.

Commendations

The team commends USC for:

1. The quality of the institutional report and materials provided the team. The report is well-written, directly responsive to the issues raised by the Commission, and provides extensive detail about the processes USC has undertaken as a result.
2. Revising its general education (GE) curriculum in a collaborative and deliberative manner. The institution has enlisted a wide variety of stakeholders to develop a thoughtful and flexible structure that marshals the many strengths of USC's schools to diversify the education of the university's students.

3. The development of a comprehensive undergraduate program review process and implementation strategy for the outcomes that has had a material impact on curriculum and the student experience.
4. Its nationally recognized writing and critical thinking study and the ways in which the findings of that research are informing pedagogy and curriculum in the writing program and general education writ large.
5. The development of creative capstone courses and culminating projects in the arts, communication, and engineering schools.
6. Increasing access and diversifying its student body, particularly in its efforts to attract, retain, and graduate transfer students, especially students coming from community colleges, first-generation college students, and students who need significant financial aid to attend USC.
7. Significantly increasing its undergraduate graduation rates over the past 15 years, which has been an effort across many parts of the campus. The team was impressed by the institution's efforts to reach out to students who have not registered for the next semester.

Recommendations

The team recommends that USC:

1. Continue its efforts in the creative transformation underway in the general education curriculum, and in its program review process. (CFRs 2.4, 2.7, 4.3, 4.4, 4.7)
2. Benchmark its program review practices against those of peer institutions, to help refine the process and to bring the review of undergraduate programs and graduate programs into closer alignment. (CFR 4.4, 4.5, 4.6)
3. Leverage its institutional research capacity. The institutional research capability is improving. The team recommends that the institutional research unit work more closely with the administrative leadership and the faculty so that data are analyzed, presented, and otherwise made available in ways that are useful for decision makers. The team also recommends regular communication between the institutional research unit and senior leadership. USC could benefit by posting on its website data and analyses about student success, in part to highlight and publicize its exemplary work with transfer students. (CFRs 4.1, 4.2)
4. Explore ways of sharing the experiences and expertise of faculty who have developed innovative capstone courses with other faculty on campus to increase institutional knowledge and understanding of ways to assess student learning. (CFRs 2.5, 2.8, 4.4)

5. Eliminate any remaining difficulties in cross listing courses and other barriers to interdisciplinary offerings. (CFR 2.8)