



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

# Educational Effectiveness Review

*to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges*

JULY 20, 2010

Cover photo  
RONALD TUTOR CAMPUS CENTER  
(opening Fall 2010)  
photo by Joel Zink

Opposite page  
WIDNEY ALUMNI HOUSE  
(first USC building erected 1880)  
photo by Philip Channing



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The USC Institutional Context	1
Approach to the Educational Effectiveness Review	2
Integrative Perspective on Capacity and Effectiveness	3
Structure of EER	5
<b>Essay 1 – Interdisciplinary Learning: Minors and General Education</b>	<b>6</b>
Rationale	6
Objectives	8
Evidence	9
A. Pursuing Interdisciplinary Study	9
B. Obstacles to Interdisciplinary Study	10
C. Benefits of Interdisciplinary Study	12
Challenges and Opportunities	15
<b>Essay 2 – Assessment of Student Learning</b>	<b>16</b>
Rationale	16
The USC College Critical Thinking Assessment Project	17
Rationale and Objectives	17
Evidence	17
Challenges and Opportunities	21

Examining the Impact of Diversity Courses on Student Learning	22
Rationale	22
Objectives	23
Evidence	24
Challenges and Opportunities	26
<b>Essay 3 – Global Awareness and Engagement</b>	<b>28</b>
Rationale	28
Objectives	30
Evidence	31
Challenges and Recommendations	40
<b>Essay 4 – Academically-Centered Approaches to Student Success</b>	<b>41</b>
Rationale	41
Objectives	43
Evidence	44
Challenges and Opportunities	49
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>51</b>



DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY REFERENCE ROOM  
photo by Philip Channing

# Introduction

## The USC Institutional Context

Higher education is an indispensable part of the American social contract. Institutions like the University of Southern California (USC) enjoy high levels of support and public trust while expanding individual opportunities and contributing to the common good. A key element of this relationship is the public's expectation of accountability. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) developed the idea of "educational effectiveness" to satisfy the expectation of accountability. USC's approach to educational effectiveness is keyed to student learning, student success, and institutional learning. USC has robust systems in place to improve student learning and keep it at the heart of its mission, raise student success in terms of retention and graduation, and develop systems of quality assurance that are appropriately aligned to its institutional context and academic values. The Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) describes this collective approach while examining student learning and success in USC's minors and general education programs, in efforts to raise global awareness and engagement, and through academically-centered services and systems that promote student success.

USC's institutional context has three parts. First, USC is a private research university consisting of a multidimensional and diverse liberal arts college, exceptional professional schools, and a remarkable mix of conservatory-quality arts schools. Second, the University is set in the heart of the global metropolis of Los Angeles, arguably the most diverse urban center in the world in terms of ethnicity, religion, languages, economics, artistic expression, national origin, and other key characteristics of urban centers. Third, USC's college and schools share a commitment to liberal education. That commitment is mirrored in its principal institutional mission, "...the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit." These three realities are fundamental elements of the USC institutional context. They are reflected in almost every part of the University's makeup and history.

USC's academic culture is shaped by values that grow from its structure, urban location, and core academic mission. The unusual combination of a liberal arts college, professional units, and arts schools has produced a strong culture of faculty governance and makes USC a leader in promoting interdisciplinary teaching and

research that address societal needs. The University's institutional makeup and its location in Los Angeles (and on the Pacific Rim) have helped create a culture that rewards entrepreneurship, encourages global engagement, and values diversity. Finally, USC's belief in liberal education corresponds to its commitment to academic excellence and individualized, learner-centered education. Faculty governance, interdisciplinary education, entrepreneurship, internationalization, diversity, academic excellence, and a focus on effective student learning are part of USC's institutional DNA. These values are displayed prominently in the University's core documents, guide its educational practice, and play an essential role in its approach to educational effectiveness.

### **Approach to the Educational Effectiveness Review**

USC's Institutional Proposal (2005) put forward two thematic areas: 1) spanning disciplinary and school boundaries to focus on problems of societal significance, and 2) development of learner-centered education. The Capacity and Preparatory Report (2007) further developed these themes, taking into account broader socio-historical contexts which the University has done much to address – contexts marked by greater diversity, increasing global interconnectedness, and rapid technological change. Recognizing the importance of these broader realities, USC's presentation to WASC also focuses on diversity, internationalization, and technology-enhanced learning.

During the site visit in October 2008, the WASC Visiting Team requested an outline of specific areas for examination in this EER. The outline sent to WASC and members of the Visiting Team listed USC's minors program, core general education, global awareness emphasis, and retention and graduation efforts as topics for focused analysis. Following their site visit, the Visiting Team identified three areas for greater focus: interdisciplinary learning, assessment, and general education. In a conference call in February 2009, the WASC Commission added undergraduate program review to the areas for focus identified by the Visiting Team. The essays in this report discuss these areas.

Several groups were convened for this review. The faculty University Accreditation Committee was charged with the responsibility for producing this EER. Its faculty co-chairs, Professors Eileen Crimmins and Edwin McCann, have guided the University through the reaccreditation process since submission of its Institutional Proposal in 2005. The Accreditation Committee was divided into three subgroups focusing on the following areas: minors and general education programs, global awareness and engagement, and retention and graduation. Besides the Accreditation Committee, USC's Academic Information Officer, who convenes a Data Team including professionals from Student Affairs, Enrollment Services, the Registrar, and the Graduate School, annually produce the University's Data Portfolio. Insight and resources from the Data Team have been invaluable in producing this report and providing material to the subcommittees.

In addition to the University Accreditation Committee and the Data Team, several other groups have contributed to this EER. Each year the Provost and USC's Academic Senate convene a joint Committee on Academic Programs and Teaching (CAPT) to investigate selected topics. Over the past five years, CAPT has focused on the following topics connected to this EER:

- Learner-Centered Education – 2005-2006
- Assessment of Student Learning – 2006-2007
- Minors Programs – 2008-2009
- Global Connections and Engagement – 2009-2010

As discussed in Essay 3 of this EER, the charge of this year's CAPT on Global Connections and Engagement included formulating a set of university-wide objectives for global learning. Their work was completed in May, 2010. The four committees' final reports are included in Appendix B.

In addition to the CAPT groups, a special General Education Review Committee worked through the 2008-2009 academic year. This endeavor proved complex and is going to require ongoing efforts. The first report of the committee has been carefully reviewed by a small task force of senior leadership from the Office of the Provost and USC College. The task force has made recommendations on what might be implemented in the short run, and what will require further discussion and consideration. The task force deliberations included several issues raised by the Visiting Team – i.e., the size of the GE program and the suggestion that the University consider specific areas of coverage.

Along with the review of General Education, two important studies of student learning – one on Critical Thinking and Writing, the other on Assessing the Impact of Diversity Courses on Student Learning – have also progressed and are detailed in Essay 2 of this EER. The first is a novel effort developed entirely by USC researcher-administrators to find evidence of critical thinking through systematic analysis of student writing. The second is a research project that examines the impact of Diversity curriculum on students' acquisition of higher order thinking skills.

Finally, a Retention and Graduation Task Force was formed in 2006 under the leadership of the Vice Provost for Enrollment Policy and Management. The Task Force has taken the lead in developing new systems and practices to raise student success rates. Members of the Task Force also helped craft this EER – their work is in Essay 4. Several members of the University Accreditation Committee have served on the committees described above. Numerous other campus groups and individuals reviewed drafts of this document.

### **Integrative Perspective on Capacity and Effectiveness**

The process of reaccreditation, from the Institutional Proposal to this Educational Effectiveness Review, has presented unique opportunities for reflection and progress. The EER in particular has allowed the University to review processes designed to insure the quality and effectiveness of curricular and co-curricular programs and services. Following the 2008 site visit, the Visiting Team observed that discussion of assessment should “penetrate further into academic culture.” As a result, fostering discussion of assessment has been a priority as work on this EER progressed. Dialogue on assessment has traction and momentum on several fronts. It has taken place in departmental meetings as faculty reviewed program learning objectives. It has included those engaged in institutional research that will produce evidence to further assessment efforts. It has continued informally in offices, lounges, coffeehouses, and online as dedicated faculty work to develop new ways to prepare students to succeed in an increasingly complex and global world. How to evaluate student learning has emerged as a key topic of cross-campus dialogue, through many presentations, roundtables, forums, internal grant solicitations, and committee deliberations and reports.

Assessments of student learning by USC faculty, academic staff, and student service professionals are not always recognized as such if the language of the assessment movement is not used in the discussions. In preparing this EER, the Accreditation Committee recognized many examples of faculty evaluating evidence of student performance to judge program effectiveness and to make improvements in pedagogy and curriculum. These efforts are careful, sophisticated and widespread.

Within many of USC's schools and in the Division of Student Affairs, work and discussion of assessment is well-advanced. Within the past five years, several schools and programs – Music, Architecture, Engineering (Viterbi), Journalism, Medicine (Keck), Public Planning, and Social Work – have completed reaccreditation via their respective accrediting bodies. All conduct careful assessments and many are leaders in assessment of student learning, including the Rossier School of Education and the USC School of Social Work. In addition, many experts in Rossier actively consult on assessment in other USC units.

The Student Outcomes Research Office ([http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/student\\_surveys/](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/student_surveys/)) in the Division of Student Affairs employs multiple means of assessing learning, including surveys, interviews, analysis of administrative data and other resources. Indeed USC's annual Student Engagement Survey provided important data for this review. Following feedback from the WASC Visiting Team, USC's Academic Information Officer, Associate Dean of Students, and Accreditation Liaison Officer were asked to identify ways to develop additional sources of evidence of student learning. With support from the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Student Engagement Survey was revised to include questions on interdisciplinary and global learning, which bolstered the survey's academic focus. Results from the 2010 version of this survey are discussed in Essays 1 and 3 and will be shared broadly with academic units.

The Student Outcomes Research Office works closely with the Testing Bureau and Assessment Committee (<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/assess/>) as part of a new Center for Testing, Research, and Assessment in Student Affairs. In addition to their research on the effectiveness of co-curricular programs in the Division, they provide a wealth of evidence for university-wide initiatives and contribute valuable evidence that is shared with the academic units.

Faculty engagement in assessment in the liberal arts and sciences has also deepened considerably. Following the Visiting Team's suggestion that greater cooperation of faculty and department chairs be enlisted in assessment, the deans of USC College led an initiative to engage faculty in every department and program to revise and renew formal student learning objectives for all undergraduate degree programs. This initiative prompted faculty discussion of assessment and has provided a strong foundation for work to improve student learning. The College has moved expeditiously to schedule departments for Undergraduate Program Review (UPR) beginning in the Fall of 2010.

Finally, in USC's arts schools, colleagues found that many longstanding practices – portfolios, recitals, film and digital design projects, productions, concerts, models, etc. – represent a sophisticated approach to assess learning and evaluate educational effectiveness. For example, within USC's Thornton School of Music all performance majors are required to perform a live "jury" before a panel of faculty each semester. Further, these same students must perform an entire hour-long recital, again in front of a faculty panel, as a capstone experience during their final semester. These authentic evaluation experiences are graded, quantitatively and qualitatively, by the faculty panel. Results of these evaluations are used equally to evaluate student learning and curricular effectiveness. It is fair to say that robust practices of assessment are present at the University: we assess; we do so often; we do so carefully. We also recognize that we need to do so more systematically so our efforts can have a more positive effect on the learning environment. How shall we do this?

In accordance with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) 2009 Handbook of Accreditation, the University has devised an approach to evaluating educational quality and effectiveness that

is consistent with its institutional context and values. The approach contains six specific benchmarks and practices.

1. Every degree program will have a clear set of learning objectives devised and approved by faculty in that program. These objectives will be regularly reviewed, discussed, and modified by the faculty with appropriate input from those who make up the community of stakeholders.
2. Program learning objectives will be publicized so students know the expectations of their faculty for what constitutes excellence in their programs.
3. Each program will gather evidence of quality and student learning from a variety of sources and assemble that evidence into regular portfolios and/or summaries. University-wide data and other forms of evidence will be made available to departments to support their efforts.
4. Faculty meetings and/or retreats will be held regularly to discuss program effectiveness and quality in light of available evidence. A culture of inclusion is encouraged for these gatherings. Faculty will decide how best to structure discussions and how best to provide opportunities for input.
5. Evidence of student learning and accounts from faculty gatherings will be included and evaluated as part of USC's new federated model of Undergraduate Program Review (UPR).
6. Each unit will develop a feedback loop whereby results of program review and evidence of student learning are made available to faculty and student service professionals who are in positions to improve quality, effectiveness, and student success.

Each of USC's academic units will determine how to meet these commitments in ways that correspond best to their unique academic cultures and objectives. All units will devise systems of undergraduate program review consistent with USC's new Undergraduate Program Review (UPR) guidelines (Appendix A – Response to Visiting Team Recommendations).

### **Structure of EER**

Faculty and staff approached the Educational Effectiveness Review as an opportunity to introduce greater coherence into the University's systems of assessment. The following four essays illustrate efforts to strengthen USC's culture of self-improvement. In accordance with the WASC Educational Effectiveness Framework, this review demonstrates USC's commitment to student learning and student success, as well as institutional learning, by documenting how USC: 1) gathers and reviews evidence of student learning and success; 2) attunes the educational environment to learning, success and other goals; and, 3) ensures that evidence of learning and success is shared with faculty and staff, is used to improve quality, encourages innovation, and improves educational practice for the sake of students.

The four essays that follow examine educational effectiveness in the following areas: USC's minors and the Core/General Education program; two studies on student learning; university-wide efforts to raise global awareness and promote engagement; and, university-wide efforts to improve student retention and graduation rates. Each of these essays fits within the two themes the University set out in its 2005 Institutional Proposal – interdisciplinarity and learner-centered education. In preparing the essays, members of the University Accreditation Committee considered the rationale for each topic area, discussed objectives in terms of student learning and success, analyzed direct and indirect evidence of learning and effectiveness, and identified challenges and opportunities. Essays are organized around these headings.



Students Cody MacLake, Lauren Estella, and Jessie Burr  
at the JOINT EDUCATION PROJECT (JEP) HOUSE  
photo by Philip Channing

## Essay 1 – Interdisciplinary Learning: Minors and General Education

### Rationale

This essay deals with the heart of USC’s identity as a place that combines opportunities for breadth and depth in pursuit of liberal learning. USC’s minors and general education programs have together advanced the University’s Renaissance ideal of interdisciplinary learning to encourage breadth and depth. The combination of a liberal arts college, professional schools, and arts schools makes USC the perfect environment for a culture of interdisciplinarity to take hold. Changes to the GE program in 1997, increases in the number of minors offered, and the ethos of the Renaissance ideal have led to noticeable changes in students’ academic choices. From 1998 to 2009, the percentage of undergraduates completing multiple degrees, double majors, or major-minor combinations more than doubled, from 16% to 34%. For students who matriculated as freshmen rather than as transfer students, the percentage completing multiple degrees is 43%.

In 1997 the University created what is known as the “USC Core” which has three parts:

- General Education: a six-course, 24-unit GE program
- Writing: a two-course, 8-unit writing curriculum
- Diversity: a one-course, 4-unit diversity requirement

Together, these elements comprise just over a quarter of a student’s undergraduate studies. The creation of the USC Core signaled a significant shift in the University’s strategic approach to undergraduate education. Unlike the old system, the current plan established six GE categories required of all students regardless of major – every student completes one course in each of the six categories. In addition, students complete a two-course Writing Program and a one-course Diversity requirement – writing and diversity are discussed extensively in Essay 2 of this EER. The Writing and Diversity requirements are the same for all undergraduates and cannot be waived with AP exams.

Under the previous program, general education requirements ranged from four to eleven courses depending on a student's declared major. When students changed majors, their GE requirements often changed as well. This Byzantine system made it difficult for students to change and/or add programs without the help of advisement experts. Because faculty rarely knew all the ancillary GE rules, few were able to usefully counsel students without passing them off to professional advisors. A change of degree objective from, for example, the BS to the BA in Biological Sciences would add GE requirements which might delay a student's graduation. In addition, the size of GE often made it difficult for students to pursue a *second emphasis* (i.e., multiple degrees, a second major, or a minor). The system proved cumbersome and got in the way of promoting the Renaissance ideal and of widening students' educational apertures.

The current more streamlined USC Core program makes it easier for students to plan their programs. With more electives, students can map out broader, more interesting programs of study. To provide options for using these added electives, the University increased the number of minors. Students have almost 150 minors from which to choose. Under the current USC Core program and with so many available minors, faculty are more able, once again, to advise and mentor students.

The 1997 creation of the USC Core simplified requirements and, on average, reduced the size of the GE program so more students could pursue a second emphasis. However, noting that only about a third of our students pursue a second major or minor, the Visiting Team asked the question: "Is this bargain justified?" They recommended a clearer articulation of the rationale for our system of majors and minors and of the Renaissance model of undergraduate education. These questions informed the charges of both the Minors and GE Review committees.

The rationale for USC's system of majors and minors rests on two pillars: one a belief; the other a reality. First is the belief that interdisciplinary breadth is inherently worthwhile on academic grounds. Breadth of studies provides exposure to a broader range of topics and prompts more reflection on the part of students regarding modes of inquiry across disciplines. The value of adding perspective through breadth to complement specialized study reflects a longstanding consensus of the USC faculty. Evidence presented later in this essay supports the value of pursuing a second emphasis in the form of a second major or a minor. Second is the fact that the bachelor's degree is no longer the terminal degree for most students. About two-thirds of USC's graduates expect to or do continue their studies beyond the bachelor's level. The rapid rate of social and technological change, the process of globalization, and new and emerging career opportunities makes advanced study and workforce mobility increasingly important. Given this reality, academic breadth will be important to graduates' later successes.

Under this rationale, the University set out to distinguish itself as a place where students have the flexibility, curricular freedom, resources, and encouragement to combine disparate fields of study. An important parallel goal of the University's longstanding emphasis on interdisciplinary learning is to encourage students to become active participants in charting their educational paths, and to make choices in an intellectually self-conscious fashion, keyed to their academic, creative, and professional interests and curiosities. As they construct their programs, students consider why they do or do not choose to add a second emphasis. Students' pursuit of interdisciplinary learning may take any of three forms:

- Emphasis on greater breadth: Selecting a second emphasis that is far removed from the concepts, subject areas, or modes of inquiry of the first. Under this approach, a second major or minor is

declared and appears on the transcript.

- Emphasis on greater depth: Selecting a second major or a minor that adds depth and exposure to the concepts, subject areas, or modes of inquiry similar to the first. Under this approach, a second major or minor is declared and appears on the transcript.
- Cross-disciplinary exploration: Not selecting a second major or minor emphasis, and pursuing greater breadth or depth through a more individualized selection of courses. Under this approach, no second emphasis appears on the transcript though the goal of interdisciplinary learning is pursued.

The three approaches fit well within the Renaissance ideal. The first two lead to credentialing on the transcript, adding to a student's educational profile from within a recognizable disciplinary or professional frame. The third represents interdisciplinary exploration without regard to earning a transcript credential, thus allowing students to chart more individualized paths. In all these cases, students must balance the breadth and depth aspects of the Renaissance ideal while deciding whether they wish to combine programs that represent their academic or intellectual passions, prepare them for future professional education, help them explore an area of social significance or activism, develop their creativity, add skills to prepare for a career, etc. Which approach students choose is the product of discussion with faculty, advisors, and other students.

## Objectives

USC's GE and minors programs are curricular elements that function together to allow students to take full advantage of the resources and opportunities the University has to offer by facilitating major/minor combinations students wish to pursue. While they function together, they have separate objectives.

The University's General Education program is structured to provide a coherent, integrated introduction to the breadth of knowledge each student will need to be considered a generally well-educated person. In 2005 a faculty committee identified five principal learning goals for the program as a whole:

- To teach students the skills needed for critical thinking, writing and reading.
- To teach these skills in a specific context, i.e., social issues, cultures and traditions, science and society.
- To teach students how to apply these skills so that they can find, evaluate, and use the vast amount of information now available via the media, the internet, new technologies, and traditional forms of knowledge.
- To teach students to discern and assess the values that underlie various critical positions, and to articulate their own with coherence and integrity.
- To encourage a passion for learning.

Learning objectives have been identified as well for each of the six categories in the General Education program.

The six-course curricular program is divided into two parts: the first part, called "Foundations," presents courses that give student's the "big picture" about (I) the development of Western European and American culture, as well as (II) alternative cultural traditions, and (III) the basic principles animating scientific inquiry. The second part, called "Case Studies," provides particular opportunities for students to sharpen their critical

intelligence by considering (IV) specific applications of science and technology, (V) works of literature, philosophy and art, and (VI) contemporary social issues of urgency and importance. In addition, all students must satisfy writing and diversity requirements to complete the USC Core.

The freshman-level writing courses are co-registered with classes in the Social Issues category and include a speaker series. Together, these curricular features provide a common academic experience which helps build intellectual community and enrich learning.

The approach to effectiveness in GE includes four elements. First, a clear set of learning objectives have been devised by the faculty. Second, every GE course includes formative and summative evaluations by students that assess the fit between the particular course in which they are enrolled and the category of GE which the course satisfies. Administered by the GE Office and reviewed by the faculty and the Vice Dean of Academic Programs, these evaluations are an important indicator of alignment with the aims of the GE program and a way to reinforce GE learning objectives with students. Third, courses also include assessment of student learning which is collected in departments. Fourth, the Academic Information Officer provides the GE Office with relevant findings from student and alumni surveys. These are foundational elements of the evaluation process that have informed every subsequent GE review and revision.

USC's range of minors is central to the goal of interdisciplinary learning and engagement. The remainder of this essay deals with three related questions:

- A. What is the evidence that students pursue interdisciplinary studies?
- B. What obstacles are there to pursuing interdisciplinary studies?
- C. What are the learning benefits of interdisciplinary study for students?

## Evidence

### A. Pursuing Interdisciplinary Study

There have been significant gains in the proportion of students pursuing interdisciplinary learning to add breadth and depth to their studies. As noted earlier, the percentage of students graduating with a second emphasis (i.e., multiple degree, second major, or minor) has grown from 16% to 34% from 1998-2009. Looking solely at freshmen entrants, the percentage of students graduating with a second emphasis in 2009 is 43%; the percentage for transfer students is 18%. Over the same time period, quality indicators for incoming freshmen have improved, as has the six-year graduation rate, rising from 70% to 88% from 1998-2009. The combination of these upward trends – academic breadth, student quality, graduation – demonstrates a pattern of both increasing graduation rates and increasingly demanding academic combinations. The university community is proud of this trend.

An analysis was conducted of the University's 4,069 class-of-2009 graduates to distinguish those earning multiple degrees or double majors that were closely-connected – e.g., psychology and sociology – versus those that were widely-separated – e.g., psychology and theatre (i.e., the “Emphasis on Greater Breadth” and “Emphasis on Greater Depth” approaches: pages 7-8). The Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) taxonomy, ([http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002165\\_3.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002165_3.pdf)) was used to determine how closely related two degrees or majors are to one another. If the two-digit CIP code is different, they are considered disparate as opposed to where the CIP codes are the same. The results were examined for freshmen and transfer students. Freshmen combine programs that are widely separated 60% of the time and programs that are closely

connected 40% of the time. For transfers, who are less likely to attempt multiple degrees or double majors, those rates are 48% and 52%.

What about students who pursue interdisciplinary learning in more individualized ways (i.e., “Cross-Disciplinary Exploration”: page 8)? The challenge is how to quantify curricular breadth where there is no specified curriculum to track. We have collected evidence by analyzing academic records of recent graduates who did not complete a second major or degree or a minor. The analysis focuses on seven academic majors with relatively large enrollments and few or no requirements from other USC schools (other than prerequisites). The majors include: Cinematic Arts-Critical Studies; Cinematic Arts-Production, Political Science, Psychology, Biological Sciences (BA), Communication, and Business Administration. The records of over 2,500 recent graduates in these majors were examined to identify groups of at least three courses in a department other than the student’s major. Table 1.1 shows the results. Excluding Business Administration majors, 67% of graduates completed at least one group of three courses outside their major and just over 25% completed two or more groups.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1.1: Single Major Students**

Number of groups of three courses taken in a department outside the major

Number of groups	Cinematic Arts-Critical Studies	Cinematic Arts-Production	Political Science	Psychology	Biological Sciences	Communication	Business	Total	All but Business
None	36.3%	41.9%	25.2%	27.6%	46.4%	29.8%	75.5%	59.2%	33.0%
One	45.1%	35.0%	41.5%	43.1%	41.1%	38.4%	21.2%	28.6%	40.6%
Two	18.7%	23.1%	33.3%	29.3%	12.5%	31.8%	3.4%	12.2%	26.4%
One or more	63.7%	58.1%	74.8%	72.4%	53.6%	70.2%	24.5%	40.8%	67.0%
# of students:	193	160	135	181	56	255	1577	2557	980

### B. Obstacles to Interdisciplinary Study

Are there obstacles beyond academic factors that negatively impact the ability of students to add a second emphasis into their studies? USC’s CAPT Minors Committee (2008-2009) examined this issue for students who pursue minors. The Accreditation Committee expanded the analysis to any second emphasis. Since interdisciplinary learning is deemed desirable, it is important that barriers to seeking greater breadth and depth be identified, understood, and removed. USC conducted an analysis of economic and non-economic factors for its 4,069 class-of-2009 graduates. Areas examined included family economic status, scholarships,

---

<sup>1</sup> The business curriculum is unique in that overseas study is strongly encouraged. Students can take their concentration courses overseas (<http://www.marshall.usc.edu/undergradprogram/international/iec/outgoing-students.htm>) and a variety of other opportunities for overseas study exist (<http://www.marshall.usc.edu/undergradprogram/international/iec/international-opportunities.htm>). As a result, over half of the business students in this study reported global travel for academic purposes compared to less than 25% of students in the other majors. Another way that the business education is unique is the prevalence of internship experiences. In USC’s most recent alumni survey, 83% of business graduates reported completing at least one internship during their studies, compared to 63% of students graduating in other disciplines. USC is planning a more systematic analysis of the coursework patterns of students in all majors, pending necessary programming that is required in our Student Information System.

and loan debt. Non-economic areas included major choice, ethnicity, and gender. The results were examined for freshmen and transfer entrants. Statistical results are displayed in Table 1.3 and Charts 1.1-1.5 below. Further study is ongoing of several of the factors connected to the findings below.

**Economic Status:** The concern is that economically disadvantaged students will be less able to seek a second academic emphasis. Pell Grant designation is generally accepted as a proxy for low-income status because of its eligibility requirements. Overall, 22.4% of graduates received at least some Pell grant money, including 31% of transfers and 18% of freshmen. Students who received need-based aid were actually slightly *more* likely to seek a second emphasis. (Virtually all of this positive effect, about 3%, occurred for transfer students). Thus, it appears that low economic status is not an impediment to completing a second emphasis.

**Scholarships:** USC awards a variety of scholarships (merit aid) to both freshmen and entering transfer students based on their academic ability and talent.<sup>2</sup> Considerably more freshmen entrants who graduated in 2009 qualified for merit aid than transfer entrants (49.8% vs. 20.6%). The assumption was that students receiving merit aid would be more inclined to complete a second emphasis due to academic ability and because the scholarship would offset the need to find employment while enrolled. There was in fact a positive effect associated with merit aid but it was modest and almost exclusively for freshmen (about 6%) and not found for transfer students.

**Loan Debt:** Do students assume greater debt in order to earn a second emphasis? Table 1.2 below shows the average debt for all graduates with at least one loan (need-based or non-need-based) is actually lower for those who pursue a second emphasis. Surprisingly, the average total loan debt of students who earned a second emphasis is actually *lower* than it is for students who earned a single bachelors degree, especially for freshmen.<sup>3</sup> It is reassuring to know that overall, financial issues do not appear to impede students from broadening their studies.

**Table 1.2: Average total loan debt by student and degree type**

Student Type	2 <sup>nd</sup> Emphasis	Single Degree	Difference
Freshmen	\$49,601	\$52,331	(\$2,730)
Transfers	\$45,019	\$45,593	(\$574)

**Major Choice:** Because bachelor’s degree requirements at USC vary substantially from major to major, it is not surprising to see substantial variations in the percentage of students earning a second option. The programs of study in Engineering and Business leave little room for electives, and Architecture is a five-year program. The greatest concentration of students completing a second emphasis is in the College with almost 70% of freshmen and over 30% of transfers doing so. Not far behind is the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at 65% and just under 30%, respectively.

**Ethnicity:** Latinos pursue second emphases at the highest rates for both freshmen and transfers. White students have the second highest overall rate, but only the fourth highest among transfers, behind African-

---

<sup>2</sup> Merit-based aid includes Trustee, Presidential, and Dean’s scholarships that vary from a few thousand dollars to full remission of tuition and fees.

<sup>3</sup> However, the picture varies when need-based and non-need-based loans are examined separately.

American, Asian-American, and Latino students. International students have the lowest overall rate, most likely because a relatively low proportion have access to any form of financial aid and their disproportionate enrollment in professional programs which have fewer electives.

**Gender:** Women are much more likely to seek a second emphasis than men, especially among transfer students where the disparity is more than 2 to 1. The large disparity parallels national trends with regard to gender and higher education. In part, this may reflect the fact that women are more likely to enroll in liberal arts majors and less likely to major in Business and Engineering.

**Unknown factors:** Student interest in interdisciplinary learning is higher than reflected by the indicator of second emphasis. In addition to the 34% of students who completed a second emphasis in 2009, an additional 8.5% of students began work on a minor but did not complete it prior to graduation. Further study is planned to understand what may be preventing students from achieving their initial goals for greater academic breadth and depth.

### C. Benefits of Interdisciplinary Study

USC's commitment to encouraging interdisciplinary study is longstanding. An important source of evidence validating this commitment comes from student and alumni surveys that measure engagement, satisfaction, and perceived gains from their educational experience. The results of survey data are corroborated and often validated when cross-tabulated with academic performance data from the Registrar.

Findings indicate that students who seek interdisciplinary study immerse themselves in the curriculum at a deeper level than students who only seek a single bachelor's degree. For example, a recent alumni survey revealed that degree recipients who earned a minor or second major were 12.4% more likely to work with a faculty member on a research project than those who earned a single bachelors degree.<sup>4</sup> When the analysis is limited to those who graduated less than ten years ago – that is those who graduated under the revised USC General Education program and increased funding for student research – the percentage was even higher.

A recent survey of current undergraduates suggests other ways in which interdisciplinary study is associated with greater immersion in the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> For example, students who completed a second emphasis reported contributing to class discussions more often and, when doing so, were more likely to bring up ideas or concepts from a different course. They also reported making significantly more progress in areas directly related to interdisciplinarity:

- Appreciating the value of insights from others outside their primary field(s) of study.
- Drawing connections between academic disciplines and approaches when examining issues of societal significance.
- Acquiring knowledge and skills to communicate with others in different areas of study.

Table 1.3 and Charts 1.1-1.5 on the following page show frequencies for single-major versus second-emphasis students for the University's 4,069 class-of-2009 graduates.

---

<sup>4</sup> The survey, which was conducted in October 2009, included all bachelor's degree recipients from one year, five years, and ten years prior to the survey. The response rate was 21% overall and 30% for the one-year cohort.

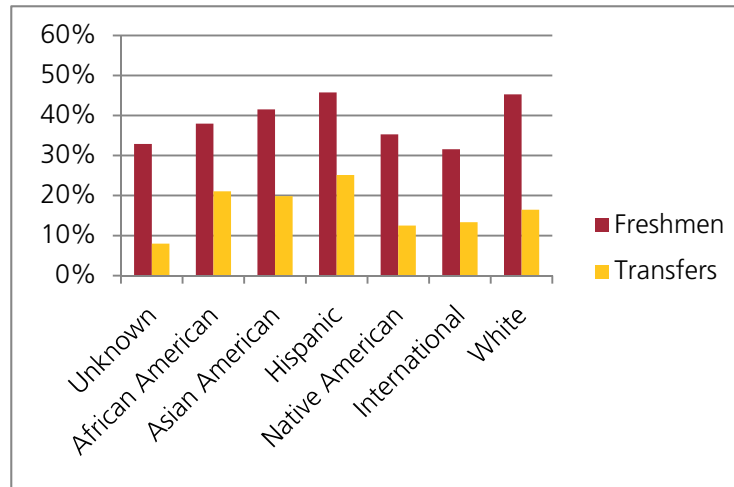
<sup>5</sup> Results are from a census of the undergraduate student population conducted Spring 2010. Response rate was 22.7%. More detail on the survey and its representativeness is reported in the Appendices to Essays 1 and 3. For the results reported here, only Juniors and Seniors were included. Key results described replicate results found in a similar student survey administered one year earlier.

**Table 1.3 and Charts 1.1 – 1.5: Frequency of earning a second emphasis (adding a minor or second major) by student status (freshman/transfer) and ethnicity, aid status, and discipline**

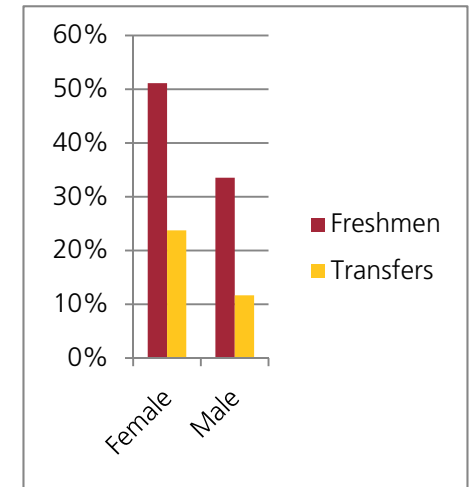
**Table 1.3: Student Status by Second Emphasis**

Population	Total	Second Emphasis		Single Major	
		Count	%	Count	%
Freshmen	2662	1141	43%	1521	57%
Transfers	1407	246	17%	1161	83%
All Graduates	4069	1387	34%	2682	66%

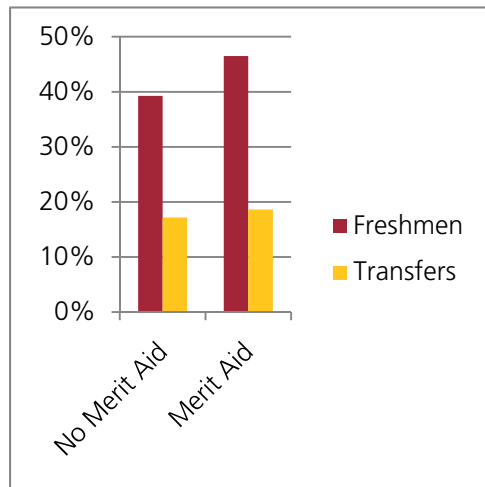
**Chart 1.1: Ethnicity by Student Status**



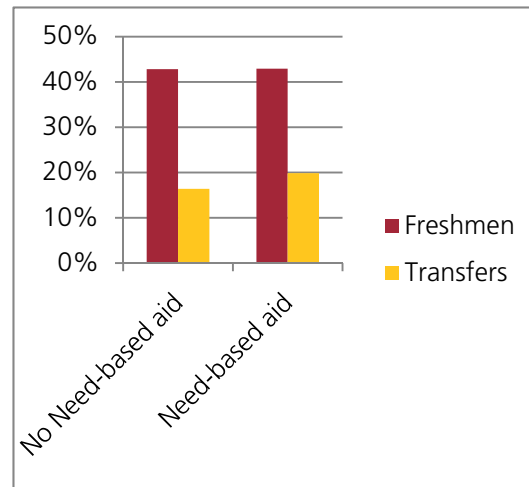
**Chart 1.2: Gender by Student Status**



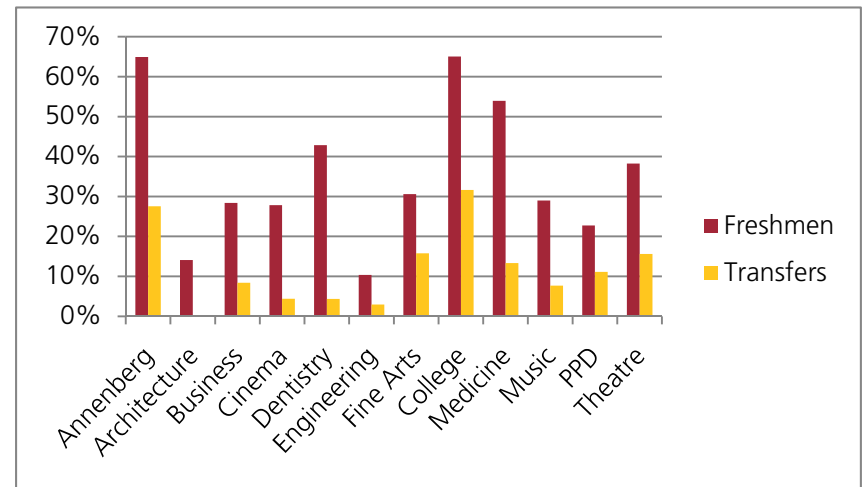
**Chart 1.3: Merit Aid by Student Status**



**Chart 1.4: Need-based aid by Student Status**



**Chart 1.5: Owning Unit by Student Status**



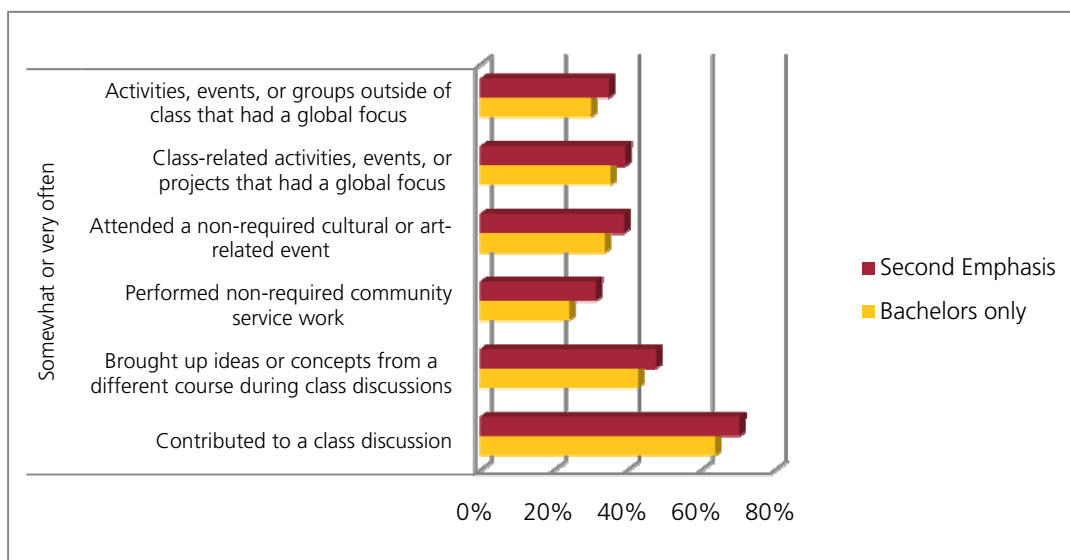
Note: The above results reflect the 4069 students who received a bachelor's degree in the 2009 academic year (Fall 2008, Spring 2009, and Summer 2009 terms). A full statistical breakdown of this population is provided in Appendix B.

Interdisciplinary experiences also seemed to have a benefit for one’s primary academic field: students with a second emphasis reported greater progress in understanding their primary field and in the ability to critique research studies in that field.

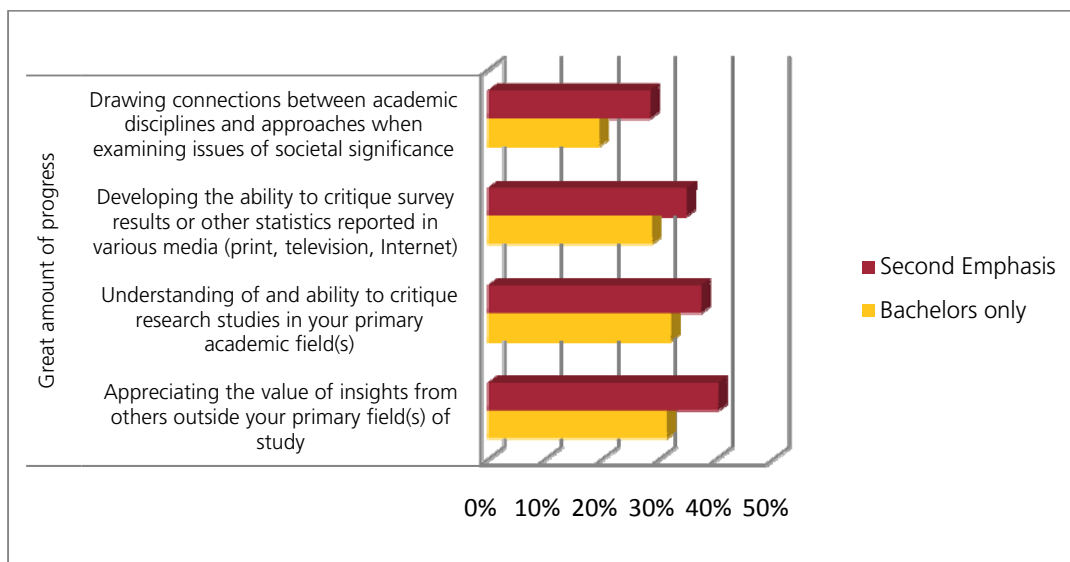
Second emphasis students also were more active learners outside the classroom. For example, compared to single bachelors seekers, they:

- Participated in more activities, events, or groups outside of class that had a global focus.
- Attended more non-required cultural or art-related events.
- Engaged in more non-required community service projects.

**Chart 1.6: Comparisons of single bachelors seekers and second emphasis seekers on reported behavior**



**Chart 1.7: Comparisons of single bachelors seekers and second emphasis seekers on perceived progress in selected areas**



These results are displayed on Charts 1.6 and 1.7 on the previous page. No claim is made of a causal relationship between interdisciplinary learning and other learning activities in and out of the classroom. However, the correlation suggests that students pursuing interdisciplinary studies are likely to seek other types of engagement that enrich learning and that faculty want to foster.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Interdisciplinary learning has been the hallmark of the USC educational experience since the creation of the Renaissance Scholar program in 2000. It calls for a more integrative model of education that serves as a hedge against overspecialization. Interdisciplinary study may help resist orthodoxy, promote creative thought, and develop more discerning academic sensibilities. At the same time, the University remains committed to disciplinary knowledge. As is frequently noted by faculty, the University's interdisciplinary programs are only as strong as its disciplines. Strong disciplines are the foundation for interdisciplinary work. Even so, the Renaissance ideal of breadth and depth adds to the University's distinctiveness and appeal to prospective students and their families. More can be done to build on this:

1. Obstacles to interdisciplinary education continue to exist. The University is committed to removing such obstacles in terms of, for example, approval of new programs and course proposals. It has been observed that interdisciplinary majors and minors move more successfully through USC's decentralized system with Provost involvement so additional ways to provide leadership are being considered. The University continues to assess such concerns and fix problems as they are identified.
2. How might the University extend opportunities for interdisciplinary studies to students for whom options are not as readily available? Professional schools should identify the potential benefits of interdisciplinary perspectives for their students and ask themselves how more options can be made available without diluting preparation and practice. USC's new Academic Achievement Awards provide high performing students extra units with no additional cost to those pursuing a second emphasis. This will help mitigate the cost of pursuing a second emphasis. The University will investigate whether these new awards will reach students who are "high-need" financially.
3. There should be more study of some of the correlations between students' breadth of studies and increased likelihood that they will engage in, for example, research. Is this a causal relation or does the promise of interdisciplinary flexibility attract a certain type of student to USC who is more inclined to engage in these other activities to begin with? Is there evidence that encouraging breadth is beneficial to students after they graduate? The University has committed to more regular surveys of its alumni so sources of evidence can be further developed and programs crafted to meet this need.
4. What is the next frontier for adding interdisciplinary elements into the USC educational experience? There should be faculty-driven discussions concerning dimensions of interdisciplinarity that stretch conventional understandings centered on disciplines and curricula – i.e., residential colleges, the co-curriculum, international travel for academic study, internships, community service, online communities, innovation/invention, activism, etc. Are there unforeseen tensions between pursuing a second emphasis and participation in other activities that the University would like to encourage – for example, community service and study abroad? USC's faculty and student leaders will encourage discussion of these topics over the coming years.



Students Nick Yee and Seong-Ah Kim  
rehearse in NEWMAN RECITAL HALL  
photo by Philip Channing

## Essay 2 – Assessment of Student Learning

### Rationale

This essay encompasses two important student learning studies conducted by USC researchers. The first examines Critical Thinking and Writing and is referred to on campus as the “Critical Thinking Assessment Project.” This project was developed by two USC researcher-administrators to examine the development of critical thinking from the freshman year to the junior year as demonstrated through the change in students’ ability to write clearly and analytically. Over the course of the project’s development, faculty members from different disciplines have come together to help formulate rubrics used for assessment, the Center for Scholarly Technology has contributed systems support, and deans and others have participated in discussions on the project’s utility for assessing critical thinking across the curriculum. A principal theoretical claim underlying this project is that writing is not just an artifact of learning evidenced in one course context; writing reflects a kind of thinking that informs much of what students are expected to learn in the Core curriculum.

The second study on Assessing the Impact of Diversity Courses on Student Learning is the brainchild of two faculty members from USC’s Rossier School of Education. The focus of their research is on understanding the process of learning in the context of diversity courses. Their work examines the impact of diversity courses on students’ acquisition of “higher order thinking skills” (HOTS) and their understanding of the social conditions that create diversity. Direct evidence validating the central hypothesis has not, as yet, been gathered, but collaborations between the Principal Investigators and a number of faculty members from different departments who teach courses that satisfy USC’s Diversity Requirement have been made. Several doctoral candidates have also participated, conducting research related to the study as part of their doctoral dissertations. More partnerships with faculty are expected as the study continues.

Both of these studies have generated campus-wide dialogue about learning and assessment over the past semesters and debate about diversity, critical thinking, general education, and pedagogy. Both are ongoing and have secured significant grant support from the Teagle Foundation.

The content for the remainder of this essay is drawn primarily from the researchers themselves, who provided summaries of their work. Members of the University Accreditation Committee are grateful for their participation and invaluable contributions to the EER process.

## The USC College Critical Thinking Assessment Project

### **Rationale and Objectives**

Central to the learning objectives of the USC General Education Program is the ability to think critically. Because facility in critical thinking is also a central learning objective of the Writing Program, that program and the GE office collaborated in creating the USC College Critical Thinking Assessment Project. Developed by researcher-administrators Richard Fliegel and John Holland, the project is an attempt to create a system to gather direct evidence of student learning.

A primary assessment instrument is standardized testing to measure student learning. An often cited challenge with tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) is whether students will take them seriously as a regular part of their curriculum, endorsed by their faculty, in order to elicit their best performances. This concern is often addressed in the literature with “embedded” means of assessment, but the metaphor inadvertently captures the problem associated with any assessment method extrinsic to the course, inserted into the faculty member’s original course requirements.

This project was designed to solve the problem by relying on student work elicited by faculty as a regular part of their class assignments, not by “embedding” a tool but assessing the critical thinking skills displayed in the essays students are already writing for their courses. One theme that runs through much of the literature is skepticism regarding the judgment of classroom faculty charged with assessing their own students’ abilities, because those teachers would be assessing their own effectiveness. The Critical Thinking Assessment Project began with the opposite perspective, that trained faculty are the only people with the expertise to make informed judgments, provided the research design avoids such conflicts of interest – that is, they would not be assessing the work of their particular students.

### **Evidence**

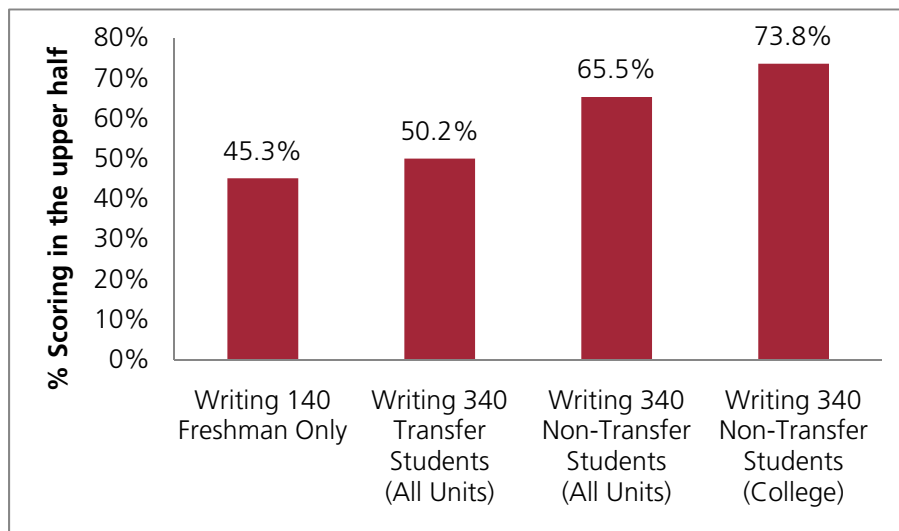
The First Holistic Reading, 2005-2006: With support provided by the Provost, the Writing Program and General Education Office conducted a preliminary study in 2005-2006, in which specific writing prompts were assigned to students in classes at two different points in the curriculum. Volunteers were solicited among instructors of Writing 140, *Writing and Critical Reasoning*, a class enrolling primarily freshmen, and Writing 340, *Advanced Writing*, enrolling only juniors and seniors. Students in each class were given the same time in which to write their essays; the essays from both classes were mixed together; and a trained cohort of writing faculty scored them, using a holistic scoring rubric designed by Peter and Noreen Facione<sup>6</sup> to measure critical thinking.

---

<sup>6</sup> Facione, P.A, Facione, N.C., & Measured Reasons LLC (1994, 2009©) *Holistic Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric (HCTSR)*. Milbrae, CA: California Academic Press. (<http://www.insightassessment.com/9HCTSR.html>)

The results were encouraging. When tracking the scores and comparing those that fell in the upper-half and lower-half of the rating spectrum, those that had been written in Writing 140 by freshmen scored dramatically lower than those that had been written in Writing 340 by juniors and seniors, pointing to improvement of critical thinking as exposure to university curriculum grew. The results are on Chart 2.1.

**Chart 2.1: Results from 2005-2006 Critical Thinking Study**



**Earning Credibility among Other Faculty:** The same set of essays that were used to train scorers were given to a second group of readers: nine tenure-track faculty at USC, drawn from disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. These individuals were asked simply to rank order eight essays, without prior discussion of points of agreement. They were asked to use whatever criteria they normally used in assessing the work their students produced for their classes.

No two faculty members among the nine respondents produced the same rank order of essays. However, the average scores of those faculty members matched the sequence assigned to the essays by scorers in the trained cohort of writing instructors. That is, the essays judged “upper half” by the original trained scorers received average rankings 3.56 and 3.44 (on a 4.0 scale) from the faculty, while the essays judged “lower half” by the original trained scorers received average rankings of 1.89 and 1.11 from the faculty using their own criteria. Together, the faculty rated the relative critical thinking evidenced in the essays in the same sequence as was determined in the experimental scoring.

While interesting differences in scoring over time and between disciplines were observed, the primary summative goal was achieved: to demonstrate that the trained scorers were reading for the same sense of critical thinking the faculty were teaching in their classes, without defining precisely what that was.

**The 2009-2010 Study:** The 2005 experiment relied upon a writing prompt provided to the classroom instructors in a timed writing situation. Because most writing in the real world is not written in response to any formal prompt, an attempt was made to design rubrics that would not depend upon knowledge of the prompts used to elicit the essays. The researchers repeated the exercise with new rubrics of their own design, using essays written in response to the classroom faculty’s own assignments.

With continued encouragement from the Provost Office and support from the Teagle and Spencer Foundations, two original rubrics were designed, one using a six-point scale and a second using a four-point

scale. Six-point scales are more common in holistic readings of student writing and allow finer distinctions along the parameters of the rubric. Six-point rubrics are important in differentiating the relative achievements of individual students in a class in order to assign grades.

The research team decided that a four-point scale might be less time-consuming and would simplify training and implementation, especially at institutions without prior experience in holistic scoring. The study also compared groups of students at different points in their academic careers, rather than one student to another for the purpose of a grade. The researchers had used the four-point scale by Peter and Noreen Facione in earlier readings and were confident they could design an original four-point rubric that incorporated a different conception of critical thinking.

USC’s Information Technology Services’ Center for Scholarly Technology provided valuable support by creating software that allowed the researchers to upload student essays into Blackboard, USC’s learning management system, and then retrieve them from a large number of writing classes, at the 100- and 300-levels. The USC College’s Instructional Technology staff contributed by creating software that enabled bringing up individual student essays anonymously for scoring.

Two large-scale readings were done of 300-500 essays written by freshmen, juniors, and seniors during the Fall 2008 and Spring 2009. These essays were not written to a prescribed prompt in timed environments, but drawn randomly from portfolios assembled as part of the regular coursework in Writing 140 and Writing 340 courses. Table 2.2 captures the results for each rubric.

**Table 2.2: Preliminary Summary of Critical Thinking Study Findings\***

	Essays	6-Point Rubric		4-Point Rubric	
		N	%	N	%
<b>Writing 140 essays (lower division)</b>	Upper Half	91	35.1%	54	32.5%
	Lower Half	168	64.9%	112	67.5%
	Total	259		166	
	Statistic	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.
	Total score**	9.46	0.53	6.55	0.55
	Avg. per reader	3.15		2.18	
	Essays	6-Point Rubric		4-Point Rubric	
		N	%	N	%
<b>Writing 340 essays (upper division)</b>	Upper Half	185	70.9%	107	68.2%
	Lower Half	76	29.1%	50	31.8%
	Total	261		157	
	Statistic	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.
	Total score**	11.94	0.66	8.59	0.72
	Avg. per reader	3.98		2.86	

\*Note: Based on second reading, 2010

\*\*Represents the sum of the scores of three readers

Randomly selected student essays from Writing 140 and Writing 340 were read at least three times each by a cohort of trained scorers, in 1,560 readings on the six-point rubric and 969 readings on the four-point rubric.

In both readings, essays written by juniors and seniors in Writing 340 *Advanced Writing* scored substantially higher than those written by freshmen in the Writing 140 *Writing and Critical Reasoning* classes. For example, 35.1% of the essays by freshmen scored in the upper half of the six-point scale, while 70.9% of the

essays written by juniors and seniors scored in the upper half of that scale. When the four-point rubric was used, 32.5% of freshmen essays scored in the upper half, while 68.2% of the essays written by juniors and seniors scored in the upper half of that scale.

Even a preliminary scrutiny of the data suggests that the summative goal was achieved of quantifying the difference in critical thinking skills demonstrated by freshman (in Writing 140) and juniors or seniors (in Writing 340) at USC.

It will be important to refine the process and conduct a longitudinal study of the same students, to determine whether the contrast between two different groups of students at one time is comparable to the change that takes place within a group of students over time. However, institutional effects of the study have already been felt as the experience of participants has begun to inform their subsequent practice, both programmatically and as individual instructors.

Closing the Circle: Learning about Teaching: Results from the 2010 reading are still being analyzed, as the researchers prepare for the next round of essays, but some positive effects of the project on the teaching of critical thinking at USC are already apparent.

The first has to do with discussions among the College writing faculty about the nature of critical thinking, which developed in the process of creating a new six-point rubric. All of the writing instructors in the USC College were invited to a colloquium on critical thinking that also included faculty from Philosophy, Political Science, the University Writing Committee, the USC libraries, and the Provost's office. Sidney Harman, former CEO of Harman International, Deputy Secretary of Commerce in the Carter Administration, and the Judge Widney Professor of Business in the Marshall School, attended, bringing a perspective on critical thinking from Washington and Wall Street.

At the start of the colloquium, each participant was asked to write on an index card his or her response to the question, "When you read a piece of writing that demonstrates good critical thinking, to what in the essay are you responding?" That is, what features of an essay lead you to respect its critical thinking?

The answers emphasized elements of critical thinking that are often overlooked by assessments that favor more readily quantifiable criteria. On their cards, participants reported responding to an original idea, something to make them want to continue reading, an "aha moment." In thinking through the rubrics, conveners tried to capture this sense of personal insight as an important constituent of critical thinking. At the same time, the participants carried this renewed attention to originality back to their classrooms.

Writing instructors were also invited to participate as paid scorers in the holistic readings of the project. Since the essays were not written in response to a single prompt, but responses to different assignments by different instructors, the rubric had to capture commonalities in instances of critical thinking that were not specific to the instructions of any particular assignment. Scorers were not given any prompts, but were asked to make judgments about the critical thinking demonstrated in an essay without respect to the assignment.

Nonetheless, it soon became apparent that some prompts elicited more thoughtful critical responses from students, or allowed students more easily to engage in critical reflection and reasoning. This immersion in the work produced by their colleague's students, and discussion about the features of the most productive writing

prompts, led to thoughtful comments about prompts and assignments in the scorers' own classes. This is considered another positive result of the critical thinking project as an instance of formative assessment.

Perhaps the most significant programmatic outcomes of the project as a formative assessment tool took place within the College Writing Program, thanks to the support of Assistant Director Jack Blum, who was instrumental in designing the project's six-point rubric. Finally, under the guidance of Associate Professor of Teaching Practice Geoffrey Middlebrook, the Writing Program has developed a blog interface for the online publication of student essays collected for this project. This interface allows collaborative work in the class, creates readers for the essays beyond the classroom, and motivates students and faculty to participate in the institutional assessment project.

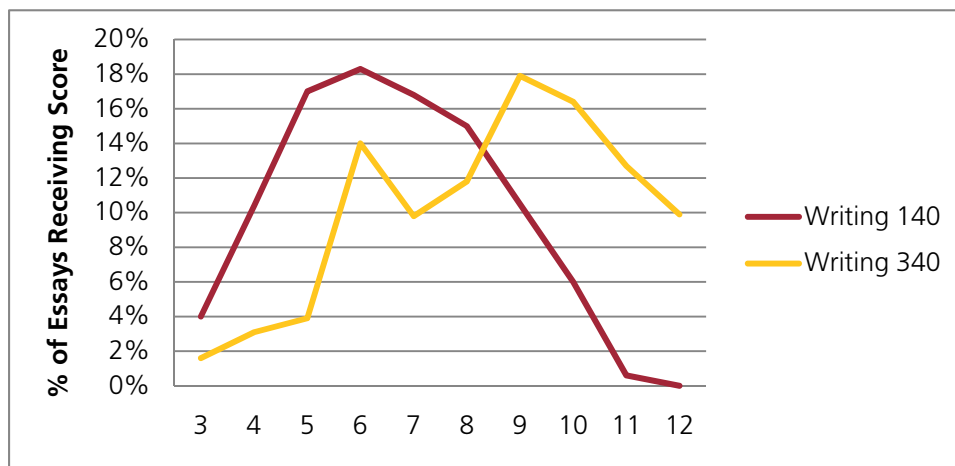
### Challenges and Opportunities

This study is in the middle of the second year of a three-year grant from the Teagle and Spencer Foundations. In the third year we hope to capture the critical thinking demonstrated in the essays of students in Writing 340 whose earlier essays were previously scored in Writing 140. This longitudinal element of the project will make it possible to determine if comparisons between different groups of freshmen, juniors and seniors are comparable to differences in the essays of the same students over time.

The study's institutional systems are not yet sustainable. The customized software written for retrieving essays collected in Blackboard, is not scalable or standardized for future uses. The readings depend upon funding from the Teagle and Spencer Foundations. Finally, the scoring rubrics and training protocols need further refinement as instruments for assessing critical thinking skills. For example, consider the following results on Chart 2.2.

**Chart 2.2: Scores of Essays from Writing 140 and Writing 340 Students**

Note: Based on 4-point rubric used on essays from 166 Writing 140 students and 157



The differences between freshmen in Writing 140 and juniors and seniors in Writing 340 is sharply represented, but what is that spike at point six on the scale of 340 essays? It could result from a strong level of agreement among scorers, that a certain set of essays earned ratings of 2-2-2 in three readings, rather than, say 1-2-2 or 2-2-3 for a total score of five or seven.

Or it might represent a point of difficulty, at which a number of students need help in improving their critical thinking skills. There needs to be a review of the essays at that point to determine whether this is an anomaly of the scoring system or a phenomenon among students.

In conclusion, while there is still work to do, it is believed the four-point rubric is sufficient to conclude that juniors and seniors have demonstrated a higher degree of critical thinking in their actual class work than our freshmen. This difference has not been attributed to any particular class or program but to the undergraduate experience as a whole. If comparable results from a longitudinal study of the same students' work are obtained, it would be argued that the rubrics and system of holistic scoring enable a school to take a "snapshot" of its effectiveness in teaching students to think critically, by systematically assessing essays written by freshmen and seniors as a regular part of their coursework.

The expectation is that the six-point rubric will prove more effective at formative assessment – for example, to study the skills of critical thinking differentiating student essays at liminal points on the scale. This can help faculty better understand what they should be emphasizing to improve the critical thinking of lower-scoring students. The introduction of either rubric at other institutions should instigate conversations about critical thinking and its pedagogy that have already begun to improve the USC classes of participants in this study.

### **Examining the Impact of Diversity Courses on Student Learning**

#### **Rationale**

The contemporary liberal arts curriculum requires students to study differences between people of different races, sexes, religions, abilities, sexual orientations, and other differential human experiences. Many institutions accomplish this through Diversity requirements which 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 study has attempted to address what happens to students' understanding of the human conditions that create diversity or examined the impact of such courses on broader student learning outcomes. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of diversity courses on students' values, attitudes and beliefs, in a specific environment – namely the USC Core diversity requirement.

The expectation was that enrolling in diversity courses will increase students' respect for those different from themselves, while improving their cognitive skills. But does this really happen? How can learning outcomes such as higher order thinking skills be correlated to students' experiences in diversity courses particularly given that: 1) students generally enroll in only one course to meet the requirement; 2) students can choose from a variety of "diversity" courses; 3) multiple instructors teach those courses; and, 4) students can fulfill the requirement at any point during their undergraduate career? Professors Darnell Cole and Melora Sundt of USC's Rossier School of Education devised this study as a systematic effort to answer these questions and to do so in a way that can be replicated in other institutional settings. A Typology of Diversity Courses (Cole & Sundt, 2008; Appendix B) was used to compare student outcomes across all required diversity courses.

While an emerging body of literature has begun examining how college students benefit as a result of racially/ethnically diverse college campuses, research specific to what Gurin and her colleagues describe as

‘classroom diversity’ is limited (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002<sup>7</sup>). Moreover, many assessments of diversity courses focus on their contribution to increasing tolerance and reducing prejudice towards other groups, not the contribution to students’ higher order thinking skills – which are arguably the skills set that are essential to the mission of liberal arts education. Classroom diversity, as defined by Gurin, et. al., is contained within the structure of a course and includes both content knowledge about diverse groups of people, as well as the interracial interactions between classroom peers. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), a diversity course is one that examines stereotypes, belief systems, the nature of prejudice, and the advantages and challenges of a multicultural society. Institutions, however, vary widely in how such courses are defined and the objectives necessary in order for a course to be designated a university requirement.

Through a Teagle Grant, the researchers designed methodologies, identified measures, and conducted several studies that assess the impact of diversity courses on students’ higher order thinking skills and other salient educational outcomes. The findings from these studies are expected to spark discussion about diversity course objectives and approvals, and to influence directly the kinds of learning activities, pedagogical approaches, and assessments faculty use in these courses. In fact, the Principal Investigators on this project have already assisted liberal arts institutions like Whittier College and St. Lawrence University with similar assessment efforts and seek to extend this work nationwide through a variety of funding sources.

## Objectives

Higher order thinking skills (HOTS) as defined by the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) – designed by the Council for Aid to Education (<http://www.cae.org/>) – includes four categories: critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication. The assessment rubric uses a six-point scale ranging from emerging to mastery skills level. On other survey instruments used in the project, HOTS is often reduced to critical thinking skills because of the questions available on the survey instrument which rely on one or more questions regarding students’ perception of their critical thinking skills, engagement, and growth. While content analysis and qualitative inquiry methods are also used, HOTS in this case is defined by the material or individuals under examination.

Currently no formal learning objectives exist across diversity courses at USC. There are, however, five guidelines used to determine whether courses are approved as diversity courses:

1. A Diversity Course must examine two or more dimensions of human diversity and must consider these dimensions in terms of their social and/or cultural consequences.
2. As a rule, at least one third of the course should be addressed to these issues, and this should be proportionately reflected in the assigned readings, lectures, and topics for papers, quizzes, tests, or other graded formal course requirements.
3. Each course should give students the opportunity for personal reflection on the formation of their own attitudes toward other groups and the effect of those attitudes on the institutions (e.g., cultural, professional, political).

---

<sup>7</sup> Gurin, P., Dey, E.L., Hurtado, S., & Gurin G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 330-367.

4. All syllabi are expected to show how the topics addressed related to issues facing students in a contemporary U.S. social context.
5. Each course encourages comparative and analytical thinking about issues of diversity.

The findings unearthed within this project suggest that critical thinking might be a useful formal learning objective across diversity courses as it is also embedded in the guidelines for required diversity courses. Further study, however, is still needed to determine the utility and benefit of formal learning objectives across diversity courses.

## Evidence

While the data included in these studies are drawn from a moderate to small subset of students attending USC, the findings suggest that diversity courses have an important and salient impact on students' self-perceptions of higher order thinking skills (HOTS – critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication). Students were consistent in reporting an enhanced and critical lens used toward understanding human differences and the complexity of those differences within social structures. Primarily through the kinds of cross-racial interactions as a result of taking diversity courses, students were able to re-evaluate both the information used to understand diverse groups, as well as learn to accept diverse viewpoints and take on another's perspective. Such perspective-taking is an important aspect of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving. Preliminary findings that use more objective measures in studies not discussed in this report also support the direction of these findings and indicate that students' written communications are also enhanced through the combination of diversity courses and students' volunteer experiences tied to those courses.

Figure 2.1 below provides an overview of the impact of diversity courses on students' educational experiences and outcomes. Essentially, there are four areas of diversity course impact that have been identified across each of the studies referenced in this section: 1) critical thinking used to understand human difference; 2) challenge existing views of those different from oneself; 3) change in perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs; and 4) cross-racial interactions. A more detailed summary of four specific studies is provided in Appendix B. Each of the four studies was conducted by USC doctoral candidates under the supervision of Dr. Darnell Cole. For the purpose of this EER, a summary of findings is presented in Table 2.3 below.

**Figure 2.1: Overview of Impact of Diversity Courses on Students' Educational Outcomes (N= 4 Studies)**



**Table 2.3: Data Source, Analyses, and Intended Outcomes**

Data Source	Analyses	Outcomes
1. Syllabi from 110 Diversity Courses	Content Analysis	Typology of Diversity Courses (4 types)
2. Typology of Diversity Courses	Mean & Standard Deviation	Identify types of Diversity Courses
3. Faculty Data and Course Survey Data	Mean, Standard Deviation, Correlational Analysis	Identify perceived differences in courses and instructors
4. Faculty Interviews	Comparative Analysis & Theme Development	Pedagogical impact of impact of Diversity Courses
5. Student Focus-Group interviews	Comparative Analysis & Theme Development	Experiential impact of Diversity Courses
6. Institutional Surveys (CIRP, Senior Survey, Transcript & Admissions Data)	Mean, Standard Deviation, Correlational & Regression Analysis	Impact of engagement on students' higher order thinking skills
7. Collegiate Learning Assessment	Mean, Standard Deviation, & Regression Analysis	Growth in higher order thinking skills by cohort/institution
8. CLA in the Classroom	Essay Evaluation & Rubric Scoring	Growth in higher order thinking skills by student/ diversity course(s)
9. Diversity Survey	Mean, Standard Deviation, & Analysis of Variance	Relationship between students' pre-college experience and reason for taking a diversity course

One study led by USC doctoral candidate Matthew Nelson, titled “Assessing the impact of diversity courses on students’ attitudes, values and beliefs” suggests that there is a significant impact of diversity courses on students’ values, attitudes and beliefs: 1) there is a general liberalizing effect as well as a decrease in materialism and an increase in humanism; 2) diversity courses taken by the end of students’ first year in college have the most impact; and 3) there appears to be little significant difference in effect across majors or types of diversity courses taken. Results are shown in Table 2.4.

**Table 2.4: Regression Coefficients for Humanism, Materialistic, Artistic, and Individualism (N=553).**

Independent Variables*	Humanism	Materialistic	Artistic	Individualism
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Student's Gender (Female)	0.065	-0.028	-.075*	0.058
White/Caucasian	-.112**	-0.032	-.039	-0.04
CIRP Humanism	.294***	.447***	.405**	.309***
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.151</b>	<b>0.229</b>	<b>0.315</b>	<b>0.144</b>
Diversity courses taken by the end of their 4 <sup>th</sup> year	.127**	-.098**	0.065	0.009
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.131</b>	<b>0.207</b>	<b>0.292</b>	<b>0.109</b>
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.166</b>	<b>0.238</b>	<b>0.319</b>	<b>0.144</b>

\*Note: Parental education and college major are not shown due to lack of significance  
\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Another study led by USC doctoral candidate Emily Caviglia, titled “Collaborative Leaders: Perspectives of Underrepresented Students in Diversity Courses and Relational Leadership” shows how the environment of the diversity classroom impacts underrepresented students' leadership identity development. Four themes were identified: 1) understanding differences; 2) traditional leadership; 3) relational leadership; and,

4) classroom interactions (Appendix B). In other words, diversity courses enhance the critical lens students use to understand differences. Students' traditional definitions of leadership were reinforced while cross-racial experiences exposed students to relational leadership, although the concept was rarely discussed directly. And while classroom participation and interactions with peers and faculty increased students' cognitive dissonance and subsequent learning, there were several instances of tokenism for these minority students when enrolling in diversity courses. Implications of the study may result in suggestions for diversity course curricular reform, as well as a better understanding for environments that promote leadership identity development in underrepresented students.

A third study led by USC doctoral candidate Sonja Daniels, titled "The Effect of Diversity Courses on International Students from China and Hong Kong: A Focus on Intergroup Peer Relationships," demonstrates that diversity courses, particularly for international students: 1) raised students' consciousness regarding social issues affecting the status of various groups in society; 2) offered a counterbalance and critique to the knowledge construction about diverse groups of people garnered from mass media (i.e. TV, movies, etc.); and, 3) enhanced students' cross-racial interactions primarily through discussion section by which international students were able to change their sometimes negative views about certain racial/ethnic groups. This study contributes to the body of knowledge on international students in the U.S., particularly how they experience diversity on U.S. campuses and how outcomes for international students may be similar to or differ from domestic students. (See Appendix B)

A fourth study led by USC doctoral candidate Wendy Stewart, titled "Measuring the Impact of Diversity Courses and Service-Learning On Student's Cross-Racial Interactions," unearthed six themes: 1) the relevance of diversity course requirements; 2) the ideal environment for classroom interactions; 3) changes in student perceptions; 4) service-learning and diversity, a matched pair; 5) service learning, the 'real' context of diversity; and, 6) the city and its impact on student perceptions. While students reported benefitting from diversity courses in their perceptions of others, the service-learning experience optimized and made real the otherwise abstract or intellectual content learned in class. Students also indicated that they probably would not have taken advantage of it without its being a requirement. Overall, this study has policy implications regarding how institutions can utilize diversity courses as a tool for student development as well as the relevance of diversity in an increasingly diversified American society and workforce. (See Appendix B)

These research studies have deepened understanding of the value of diversity courses and have broadened discussion of assessment among USC educators. As research continues, faculty and graduate students will have access to evidence that shows:

1. The impact of diversity courses on students' values, attitudes, and beliefs.
2. Their impact on underrepresented students' leadership identity development.
3. Their differential impact on international students.
4. The impact of service-learning experiences on the effectiveness of diversity curriculum.

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

One of the most important challenges to conducting this sort of research is recruiting and maintaining faculty participation. While faculty involvement within the various aspects of the project was obtained, faculty involvement remains a critical challenge. To date the following types of faculty participation from about 110

approved diversity courses have been obtained: 20 faculty were interviewed; seven faculty participated in CLA in the classroom training; and, two faculty designed assessment instruments specifically for their courses to study their impact on higher order thinking skills (HOTS). Of the faculty involved at the classroom level, four are tenured, five are faculty of color, and six are female.

Recommendations to obtain significant levels of faculty involvement include: 1) financial support for classroom-level assessment projects; 2) department, school, and university-level support and recognition for faculty participation; 3) teaching awards linked to participation; and, 4) rewards for participation in the promotion and tenure process.



VON KLEINSMID CENTER  
photo by Philip Channing

## Essay 3 – Global Awareness and Engagement

### Rationale

This essay reflects USC's aspiration to raise our students' global awareness, promote global engagement, and to be recognized as a premier global institution of higher learning. The University enrolled 6,585 international students in 2009-2010 from 112 nations – the largest number of any university in the nation. USC has many institutes focusing on global issues and regions, as well as international offices in Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, Shanghai, Mexico City, Seoul, and Mumbai. USC houses the third oldest School of International Relations in the world. Academic units and Student Affairs offer an array of language and study abroad programs, funded research opportunities, academic travel options, independent studies, special events, and a themed residential college to help students integrate global learning into their studies. In addition, USC has just announced the appointment of Kenneth J. McGillivray as Vice Provost for Global Initiatives, effective September 1, 2010. Dr. McGillivray is currently the Secretary General of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU). He has an exceptionally strong background in senior university administration and extensive experience in the internationalization of academic, research, advancement, and business development portfolios. He has worked with many universities on transforming their academic and administrative environments through the integration of global knowledge, skills, and perspectives. Dr. McGillivray will lead the University's efforts in the area of global awareness and engagement.

Why global perspective is important should be clear. Today's social, environmental, scientific, economic, and political challenges are global in scope: from climate change, malnutrition, and political violence to world health and poverty. At the same time, rapid technological change and advances in communications promote the perception that, in the words of Thomas Friedman, *the world is flat* and shrinking in ways that close the putative gap between global and local spheres. Today's students must demonstrate greater awareness of international challenges, understand the imperatives of addressing them, attempt to integrate global perspectives into their studies, and learn to navigate an increasingly interdependent global community.

Global awareness and engagement are signature features of the USC educational experience. The University's approach has been to encourage students to pursue global learning in ways that fit best their personal goals and programs of study. Examples include a neuroscience student who traveled with her classmates for two weeks in Brazil (Summer 2009) after completing a course on *The Global Performance of Healing*, to learn about followers of the Spiritualist religion who travel for physical healing offered at a Spiritualist center there. And a team of 11 students who traveled to Mali over the 2009-2010 winter recess to work on a bridge project giving villagers access to a medical center, middle school, and market, and making possible a community garden (some students earning unit credit, others not). And a group of 20 students who spent their spring break volunteering at the Navajo Nation in Utah to promote awareness of the Navajo culture through hands-on experience and did so for no academic credit. The University's approach has been for faculty and advisors to counsel students on the many available options, but prior to 2010 there were no stated rationales and/or learning objectives to guide students as they planned their programs.

On the positive side, this variety of opportunities often leads to a wider array of interpretations of globalization. Those interpretations are even richer and more complex given the diversity of the student body. Where students are asked to assume greater agency in mapping their educational paths, this too is a positive. But this approach may also appear unclear or vague in terms of an institutional rationale for pursuing global learning. In this vein, the Visiting Team wrote that, "...the meaning of globalization is defined independently by each academic unit" and recommended that, "...additional attention be given to developing a shared definition of globalization." (Report of the WASC Visiting Team, 2008: page 12)

Based on this suggestion, USC decided it would develop a unified (not uniform) vision of global learning that would also preserve program variety in areas as diverse as theatre, environmental studies, journalism, engineering, comparative literature, and business. Preparations for this EER set the University on a new course to develop a set of university-wide objectives for global learning, which would, in turn, augment the effectiveness of the current approach. The 2009-2010 Committee on Academic Programs and Teaching (CAPT) was charged with devising student learning objectives for Global Awareness and Engagement. Those learning objectives will be announced to the university community in Fall 2010.

Global learning objectives will be publicized initially through: 1) USC's academic units; 2) the USC Global Scholars program; and, 3) General Education. As learning objectives for Global Awareness and Engagement are announced, school deans will be asked to devise outcomes for their units. It is noteworthy that, as CAPT began meeting, the USC Marshall School of Business had already begun to revise its curriculum to more fully integrate global learning into their students' educational programs. In addition to work within academic units, the Global Scholars program was identified as a good way to circulate objectives across academic units. Created in 2007, Global Scholars was designed to promote work on international issues, encourage greater engagement, enhance cultural understanding and personal development, and expand awareness of responsible citizenship in a global context. As one of three major USC scholar programs – along with the Renaissance and Discovery Scholar programs – students who meet established criteria can earn a special transcript designation: *Global Honors*. In addition, up to ten exemplary students are selected annually by a faculty committee to receive \$10,000 awards to support graduate studies. It is hoped that these incentives will encourage students to pursue global learning. Global learning objectives will also be promulgated through General Education. The General Education Committee will distribute global learning objectives to all faculty teaching or proposing courses for Category II, "Alternative Cultural Traditions," to inform course learning

outcomes. Their use in General Education will help insure that all students will be familiar with the objectives so they can use them to integrate global learning into their studies. Together, these efforts will provide students greater clarity and help them make more intentional choices to integrate international activities into their academic plans.

In addition to providing a clearer picture of global learning, the new objectives are important for three other reasons. First, they were formulated by faculty and are, therefore, a statement of what the faculty deem valuable. Where faculty are the key movers in defining institutional learning objectives, they will be more inclined to participate in assessment and to view the results as valid and useful. Second, this is a way to engage faculty in discussion of student learning and assessment in their own academic programs. Involving faculty in dialogue on assessment was a recommendation of the WASC Visiting Team. Third, learning objectives bring students into conversation with their faculty, advisors, and other mentors about global learning and how to integrate it into their studies. The expectation is that articulating a vision of global learning will prompt students to engage in conversation with faculty, advisors, and their peers.

## Objectives

In May 2010, the Committee on Academic Programs and Teaching (CAPT) issued its report and recommended six student learning objectives for Global Awareness and Engagement. It was understood that these objectives would also serve as the basis for evaluating student learning and educational effectiveness. The committee recommended a set of learning objectives that are intended to convey a coherent vision for global learning while remaining flexible enough for units to identify many different kinds of outcomes most relevant to their specific academic contexts.

Publicizing the global learning objectives will help the Global Scholars program as well. The Global Scholars program has proven the most challenging of the three scholar programs in terms of developing clear criteria for excellence, so faculty quickly understood that the program would benefit from the new global learning objectives. From 2008–2010, only 18 graduates were selected by the faculty to receive the 30 available \$10,000 awards. Another 81 graduates earned the *Global Honors* designation on their transcripts in 2008, 2009, and 2010 combined. Over the same period, the combined number of students earning *Discovery Honors* through the Discovery Scholars program (begun in the same year as Global Scholars) was 178.

These numbers are low considering how many students integrate international experiences into their studies. Each year, over 80% of freshmen in the Marshall School of Business pursue some kind of international experience through options like the Global Leadership Program (GLP). The recent major revision of the business curriculum (effective Fall 2010) calls for all undergraduates to have an international experience integrated into their business studies, matching the full participation of Marshall's MBA students. From 2000 to 2010, the number of study abroad programs offered through USC College grew from 38 to 53, and the total number of students participating grew from 250 to 519, annually. *Problems without Passports* (PWP), a new College program formed in 2009, connects problem-based learning through summer travel to special summer courses. There were three PWP options offered in 2009 and nine offered in 2010. In the Viterbi School of Engineering, the number of applications for summer programs doubled from 2008 to 2010, and a growing number of students now participate in *Engineering without Borders* and *Engineering World Health*. Finally, participation in international programs offered through the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism grew from 128 to 180 students from 2004 to 2009 and the number of programs increased by

six. The fact that the Global Scholars faculty selection committee has chosen not to award the full allotment of prizes for Global Scholars in the face of growing student participation in international programs suggests that clearer criteria for global learning are needed.

The learning objectives for Global Engagement and Awareness have three parts: engagement, knowledge, and perspective. USC students are encouraged to pursue learning that increases their understanding of the process of globalization, deepens their awareness of their roles as citizens in a global society, and focuses collective attention on each individual's obligations to the broader human community. The learning objectives are as follows:

- Engage in international activities: Participate in curricular and co-curricular activities that provide exposure to patterns of life and ways of thinking that are different from your own—different cultures, religions, languages and literatures, political systems, economies, scientific practices, and uses of technology.
- Raise your global literacy: Become more knowledgeable about “the state of the world,” current global conditions and political issues, especially as related to the environment, natural resources, health pandemics, poverty, genocides, human rights, population migrations, and regional and international conflicts. Raise your awareness of the presence of global realities in everyday local life.
- Increase your intercultural competence: Explore the rich variability of perspectives and cultural practices, especially as expressed in different value systems, family structures, gender relations, symbol systems, and tastes related to music, art, clothing, food, and shelter.
- Expand your awareness of global interdependence: Raise your consciousness of the interconnectedness of life and our existence within a complex biological, planetary, social, and moral ecosystem in which we are linked together, dependent on others, and responsible for one another. You should be able to distinguish between seeing the world as a global system versus a collection of nations.
- Critique knowledge from a global perspective: Ask yourself whether interpretations offered by “authoritative” sources, especially those in your program(s) of study, are valid from a global vantage point. Let this shift in perspective guide you to new insights, fresh knowledge, critiques, original inventions, and better ways to structure human relationships, both politically and economically.
- Develop your own global perspective: Re-examine the basis of your ethical judgments, and the impact you can have in making life more just, equitable, joyful, and creative. Weigh the implications of your personal choices in terms of your obligations to others and ask yourself what citizenship in a global context means to you.

The remainder of this essay examines two areas: 1) a review of preliminary evidence of student learning in terms of the new global learning objectives; and, 2) an analysis of the experiences of USC's international student population and the challenges they face.

## Evidence

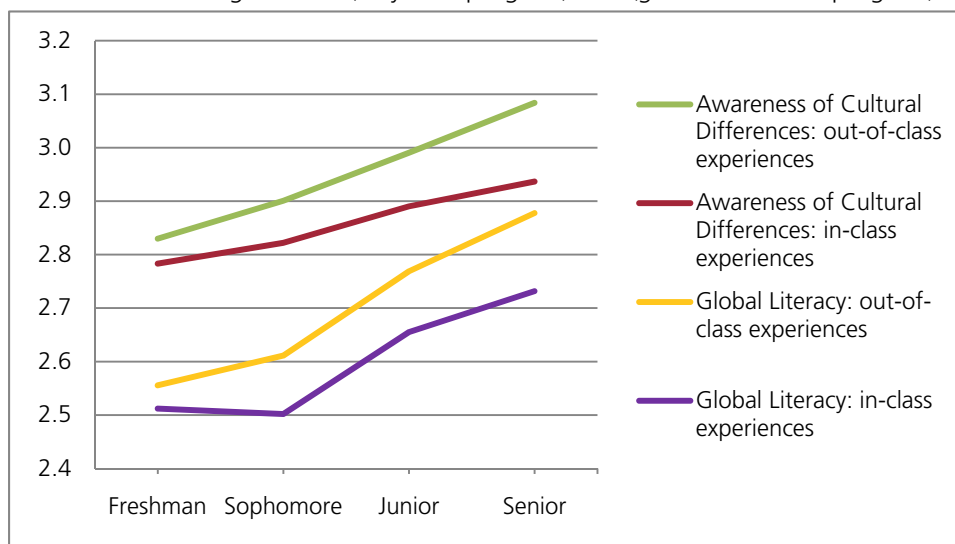
The University already has collected evidence in the 2010 Student Engagement Survey related to student engagement, knowledge, and perspective with regard to international experience and global learning. The analysis focused on overall “perceived progress” with regard to global learning over time (i.e., from students' freshmen through seniors years) and what forms of student “engagement” or behaviors were most positively

associated with global learning. Two behaviors were identified as most efficacious in spurring global learning: 1) international travel conducted for an academic purpose; and, 2) engagement in activities, events, or groups outside of class that had a global focus.

**Global learning over time:** This year’s Student Engagement Survey incorporated a variety of new items including some on “perceived progress” in *awareness of cultural differences* and *global literacy* with regard to both in-class and out-of-class experiences. On each of these measures there was a significant difference in the responses of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors with seniors always reporting the greatest gain.<sup>8</sup> The results are displayed on Chart 3.1:

**Chart 3.1: Perceived progress in global-related outcomes**

Note: Scores range from 1 (very little progress) to 4 (great amount of progress)



The improvement on these outcomes is a positive sign of the impact of student learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Improvement over time is an indicator of the vitality and efficacy of the campus learning environment. Most striking is that the greatest gains in *global literacy* and *awareness of cultural differences* were reported for out-of-class experiences, underscoring the value of learning beyond the classroom and of the co-curriculum in general.

A similar pattern was found for several additional “engagement” items that were added to the 2010 Student Engagement Survey. Chart 3.2 below displays survey result items on global-related activities or conversations. These results generally paralleled those for the global literacy and cultural awareness outcome measures described above in that there were significant differences by class level for each measure.<sup>9</sup>

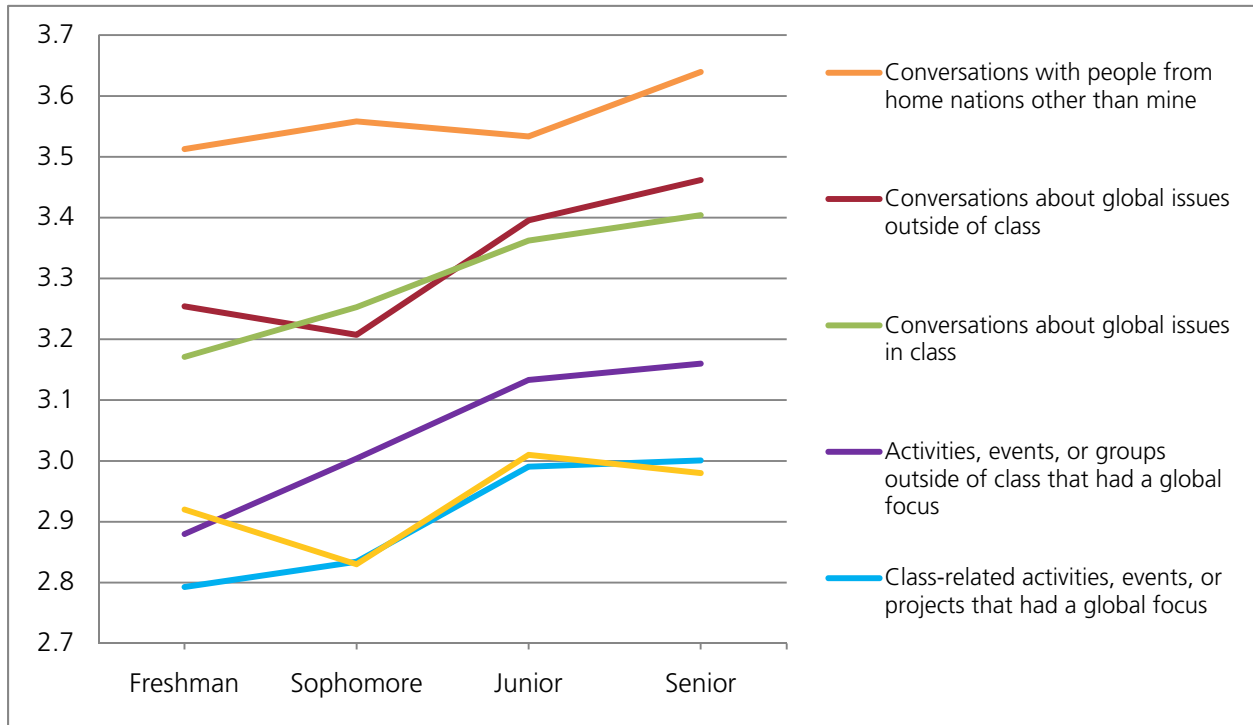
<sup>8</sup> On each of the four measures, the difference in means by class level was significant at the .001 level or below as determined by one way analyses of variance. The linear contrast was also highly significant in each case, confirming the higher levels of perceived progress by each subsequent class level. In these analyses, class level was modified so that all first time freshmen were classified as freshmen even if they had accumulated enough hours (via AP credits, etc.) to qualify for sophomore status at the time the survey was administered (i.e., March to May 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Means between class levels were tested via one way analysis of variance; all significance levels were .001 or lower except for the first item, which was significant at the .03 level. That item was also the only one for which the linear contrast (showing increased engagement by class level) was not significant at the .001 level. The significance level for that contrast was marginal (.08).

While not *causal* evidence, the fact that the pattern of these engagement results closely parallels the results on measures of perceived progress suggests a strong association between what students participate in and the benefits that result.

**Chart 3.2: Engagement in global activities in and out of class**

Note: Scores could range from 1(never) to 5 (very often)



The significance level of one of the engagement measures, “Conversations with people (faculty, students, staff) from home nations other than mine” was not as strong as the others ( $p < .05$ ). In retrospect, one would not expect strong differences on such a measure when all students are included in the analysis because almost two-thirds of them have not had the opportunity to travel internationally. On the other hand, the responses on that measure for students who had travelled internationally for an academic purpose were significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) than those who had not, confirming the experiential value of international travel.

**Academic Travel and Participation in Global Activities and Events:** Structured learning experiences through international travel and participation in global-related activities and events can have transformative effects on student learning. Overall, 52% of Survey respondents reported travelling internationally for an academic purpose or participating in global-related groups, activities, and events, or participating in both.

**Table 3.1: Participation in International Travel for an Academic Purpose by School and Student Type**

School	Annenberg	Architecture	Business	Cinema	Engineering	Fine Arts	College	Medicine	Music	PPD	Theatre	Other	Total
Freshmen Entrants	39%	37%	67%	21%	24%	30%	39%	45%	31%	41%	22%	23%	40%
Transfer Entrants	29%	32%	22%	13%	10%	20%	20%	17%	7%	11%	27%	19%	20%
Total	34%	36%	52%	20%	22%	27%	35%	41%	25%	26%	23%	21%	35%

Of juniors and seniors, 35% reported traveling overseas for an academic purpose – i.e., to study, conduct research, attend conferences, or participate in a USC or non-USC sponsored program. As Table 3.1 above shows, participation among students entering as freshmen was twice as high as those who transferred to USC, and there was also significant variation by major.

The Survey also asked students to describe their participation in groups, activities, and events that have a global focus. Of juniors and seniors, 32% (and 30% overall) reported participating often in groups, activities, and events that had a global focus. USC students have access to an extensive array of options outside the classroom (on campus and off) to further global learning. Many of USC's 600+ recognized student groups have a global focus (<http://web-app.usc.edu/scampus/student-organizations/>). Examples include: Falun Gong at USC, European Student Association, Global Business Leaders, GlobeMed at USC, Jain Student Association, MTO Sufi Association, and Student Coalition for Independent Research Abroad. Additionally, many campus activities and events have global themes. Notably, USC's Visions & Voices Arts and Humanities Initiative ([www.usc.edu/visionsandvoices](http://www.usc.edu/visionsandvoices)) includes dozens of events with an international or global focus. Some of the events for 2009–2010 included: *An evening with Isabel Allende*, *Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer*, *Filmmakers respond to genocide*, *Vietnamese Filmmakers Move from War to Reconciliation*, and *Kourtrajme - a new wave in French Urban Cinema*.

In order to make additional empirical connections between global learning and the specific out-of-class and international travel experiences discussed above, the responses of three groups were compared: 1) juniors and seniors who had traveled overseas for an academic purpose and had often attended relevant out-of-class events; 2) those who engaged in only one of those two activities; and, 3) those who participated in neither. It was expected that the benefits of the two types of activities would be additive and that they would show a positive effect on the ten measures of in-class and out-of-class engagement experiences and perceived progress discussed above (see Charts 3.1 and 3.2). On each of those ten measures, a strong significant ( $p < .001$ ) effect of activity level confirmed the expectation that globally-connected academic travel and on-campus experiences combine to produce a variety of positive learning outcomes (see Charts 3.3 and 3.4).<sup>10</sup>

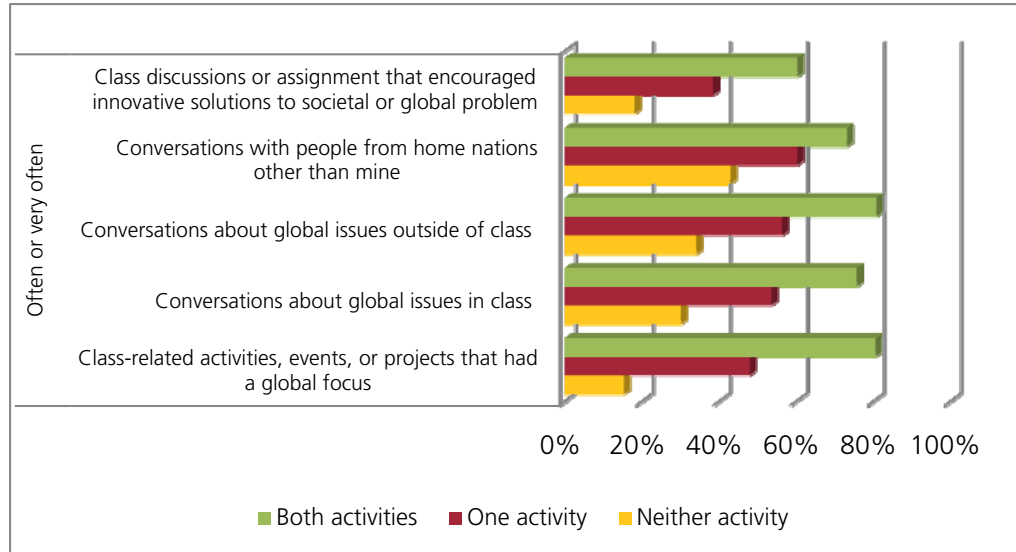
One additional analysis was conducted to explore the connection between student engagement and positive outcomes with regard to global issues. A question on the Survey asked students to assess their progress toward: "Making an impact on the global community." The engagement measures most highly correlated with perceived progress on making an impact on the global community included a growing number of USC

---

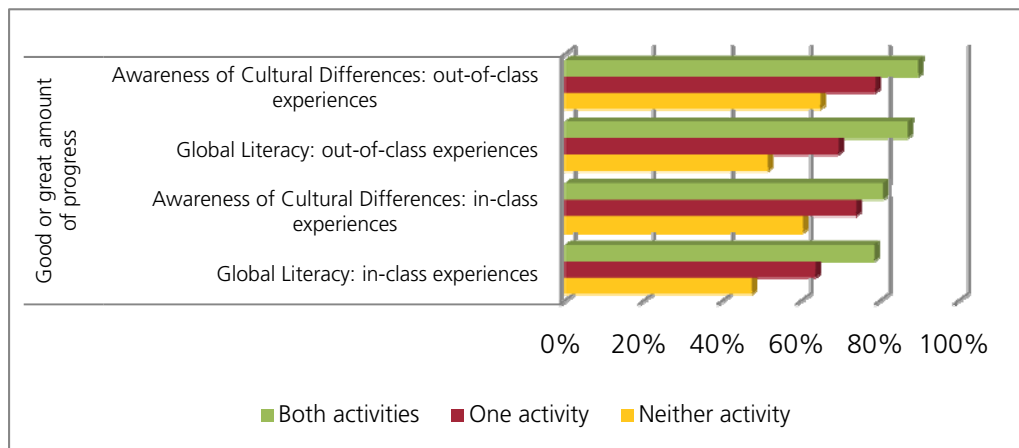
<sup>10</sup> A one way analysis of variance on each factor was significant at the .001 level, as was the linear contrast that indicated increased activity is associated with higher levels of engagement and perceived progress. One outcome that did not meet our expectation was that international travel for academic purposes had a weaker rather than stronger effect on self-reported related behaviors and on areas of perceived progress. Three plausible explanations for this result include: First, many students who did not travel internationally for academic purposes did travel for personal reasons, and it could be that considerable learning occurred on those trips. However, analyses of covariance that took personal travel into account failed to alter the pattern of results observed. Second, it may be important to quantify the intensity and duration of international travel experiences. Those that last a semester, for example, are likely to have a more profound effect than those lasting a week or two. A third explanation involves some degree of a halo-type bias in the survey responses. Respondents who report high degrees of behaviors on one dimension also tend to give similar responses on other behavioral dimensions, as well as on items that measure perceived progress, satisfaction and other dimensions where the implicit expectation of the survey administrators is "more is better." Granting that this bias is present in the data to some degree does not, however, invalidate the results as presented because the benefits of the two types of behavior are in fact cumulative, and both types have significant positive effects when considered separately.

students expressing concern for environmental sustainability and participating in class discussions and events centered on groundbreaking ideas and innovative solutions to societal or global problems; the former being an area that can be addressed by living “green” right on campus. The results are shown below in Table 3.2.

**Chart 3.3: Effect of international travel and frequent attendance at global-themed campus activities on relevant behavior**



**Chart 3.4: Effect of international travel and frequent attendance at global-themed campus activities on perceived progress in related areas**



**Table 3.2: Engagement measure correlations with perceived progress on making an impact on the global community**

Measure	Correlation
Class discussions that related course content to the issue of environmental sustainability	.35
Class discussions or assignment that encouraged innovative solutions to societal or global problem	.44
Programs designed to promote and contribute to sustainability	.39
Campus lectures or events in which groundbreaking and innovative ideas were shared	.43

In summary, results from the 2010 Student Engagement Survey show that 1) USC students as a population improve their global literacy and intercultural competence in their years at USC and 2) global learning is enhanced by specific experiences that are offered and encouraged. On the other hand, these same results show that almost half (48%) of students do not participate in these activities and report global-related outcomes at a much more modest level. Classroom activities and discussions were two areas where students reported the least frequent engagement, suggesting differences by major<sup>11</sup> but, in general, results reveal there is much room for improvement in terms of adding more global-related groups, activities, and events to foster more international dialogue and exchange.

**USC International Students:** In his 2008 conference call with Visiting Team chair Professor Derek Bok and WASC President Ralph Wolff, President Steven B. Sample stated that USC takes pride in the number of international students it enrolls. This population enriches USC's educational environment, exposing all students to international cultures, social conventions, religious traditions, etc. But President Sample also stated that the University ought to learn more about the experience of international students at USC. One sign of USC's commitment to this population is that their percentage as part of the incoming undergraduate class rose from 6% in 2008 (166 students) to 11% in 2009 (316 students).

Much assessment work is done on international students, including an annual International Student Enrollment Report from the Office of International Students (OIS), updates on admission data from the Enrollment Services Division, periodic surveys by the Division of Student Affairs, and other reports such as an International Student Report (2009) by the Office of Residential Education and the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey ([http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/Health\\_Center/hpps.ncha.shtml](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/Health_Center/hpps.ncha.shtml)) conducted jointly by the University Park Health Center and OIS focused on the International Student population. Results from these studies are shared widely with individuals who work closely with this population. In addition, USC offers a number of formal support structures and programs for international students. This web of services allows the University to support international students in relevant campus contexts. Among those:

- **USC Viterbi School of Engineering:** Of all of the schools and departments at USC, Viterbi has the highest number and highest percentage of international students. Just over 40% of Viterbi's 6,100 students are international students – (internationals make up 54.5% of all graduate and 9.7% of all undergraduate students). Viterbi offers considerable institutional support for international students and is a campus leader in terms of understanding and addressing the unique challenges international students face at USC.
- **Office of International Students:** The Office of International Students (OIS) in the Division of Student Affairs provides support services in the immigration and legal domain for USC's diverse international population. OIS advises students on their legal documents, and they also process essential student documents relating to their immigration status. In addition, OIS provides advice and services for those internationals transitioning into employment from student status. Along with legal services, OIS hosts a number of acculturation workshops throughout the year on such topics as mind-body stress reduction, American culture, and religion.

---

<sup>11</sup> These differences were confirmed via significant analyses of variances ( $p < .001$ ) on all measures of classroom activity and conversation.

- Student Affairs: In addition to their general programs, divisions, and opportunities that support the entire student community, Student Affairs also has a number of resources specifically designed to support the international student community. The two major resources offered through Student Affairs are the annual International Student Orientation and the International Student Assembly – the latter is comprised of the many international student groups on campus. Indeed, many of the social opportunities that international students enjoy at USC are created and hosted by the International Student Assembly and its constituent groups. Over the last year, the International Student Assembly offered the following programs: Graduate Involvement Fair, Welcome Mixer 2009, Discover LA Tour, International Food Fair, Holi – The Festival of Colors, Chinese New Year, Literacy Day, World Cup, and International Film Week.
- Office of Religious Life: The Office of Religious Life (ORL) oversees more student religious groups and more campus religious directors than any other university in the U.S. A number of those groups and directors exclusively serve and support international students. More than any other physical space on campus, the University Religious Center (URC) is a de facto international student center as well. Each week, hundreds of international students and their families come through the URC, and on any given night at the URC, Indian students will be drinking tea together, Chinese students will be cooking together, Korean students will be singing together, and students from all over the Muslim world will be praying together. These groups function as “cultural” groups as well as religious ones, and they collectively offer international students opportunities such as home stays, field trips, acculturation workshops, spousal support groups, community service, English language training, movie nights, and group dinners. Within the nurturing setting of the Office of Religious Life, the Dean serves the university community as a bellwether, alerting colleagues to concerns from students that may be aired there first.

A fresh source of information about USC’s international students came from new questions that were added to the 2010 Student Engagement Survey with input from the Executive Director of the Office of International Services. Nine questions were formulated specially for international students. The results, which are still being analyzed, include issues such as: "What resources, offices, and/or people have helped you adjust to USC and life in the United States" "Do you have close American friends?" and "What have been some barriers or challenges in making friends or socializing here at USC?" Another set of questions asked international students to report frequency with which students join selected student organizations. Eighty percent of international students have joined at least one student organization. The participation rates by class level are shown in Table 3.3:

**Table 3.3: Participation of international students in campus organizations**

Type of Organization:	Freshman or Sophomore (n=99)	Junior or Senior (n=147)
Academic clubs	49%	59%
Nationality clubs	37%	37%
Sports and Recreation	33%	23%
Fraternities/Sororities	16%	9%
Religious clubs	9%	14%
Other	4%	7%

Based on past surveys and reports from Student Affairs, the popularity of academic clubs and relative unpopularity of sports and recreation clubs highlights one of the major differences between international and domestic students.

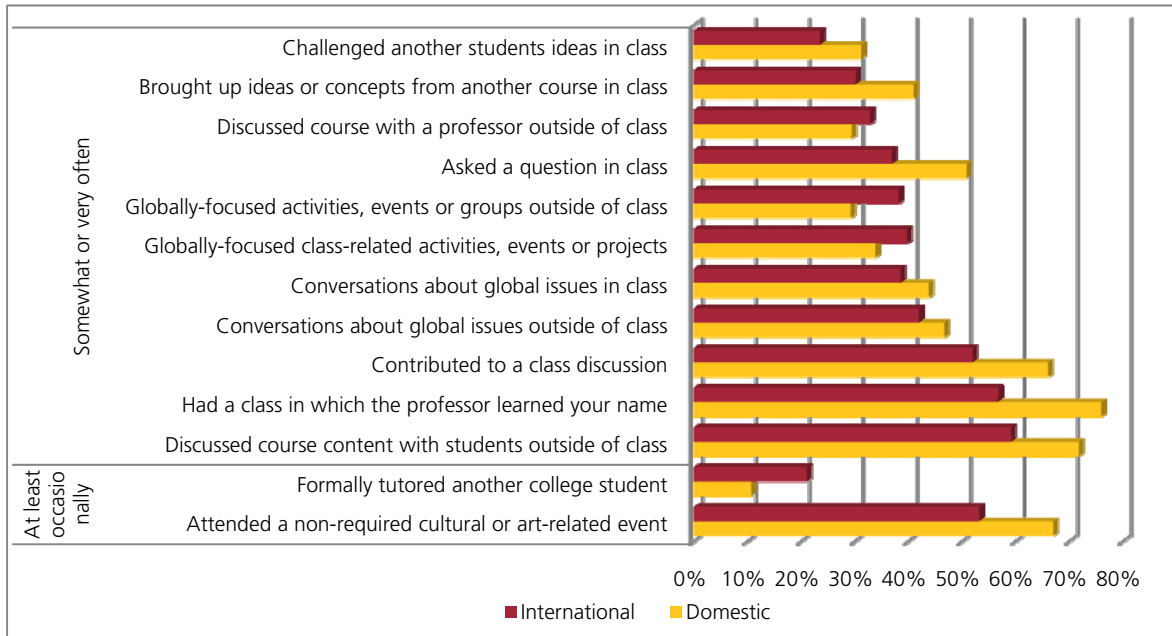
Another way that the 2010 Student Engagement Survey is helping to increase understanding of international students is by comparing their responses to those of domestic students on measures of engagement, perceived progress, and satisfaction. Beginning with classroom experiences, 52% of the international respondents said they contribute to class discussions at least somewhat often compared to 66% for domestic students. Fewer international students also reported that a professor learned their name (56% vs. 76%). On the other hand, international students were slightly more likely to discuss course content with professors after class (33% vs. 29%). Finally, 27% reported attending events or performances at least somewhat often whereas 36% of domestic students reported doing this.

The survey also reveals that international and domestic students report different frequencies of engagement on a range of activities (see Charts 3.5 and 3.6 on the next page). Behaviors that international undergraduates report engaging in significantly more often was using technology, including the internet, Blackboard, cell phones, instant messaging, and email. In addition, they travel more, spend more time in prayer or meditation, spend more time reading for pleasure, and engage more often in activities, events, or groups that have a global focus. In terms of interpersonal behaviors, the only survey item that international students engage in more often is tutoring other college students. In contrast, they are less likely to speak up in class and less likely to discuss course content with other students outside of class. They are relatively less satisfied with the nature of their interactions with other students and that no doubt plays a role in their lower level of satisfaction with their USC experience (see Chart 3.7).

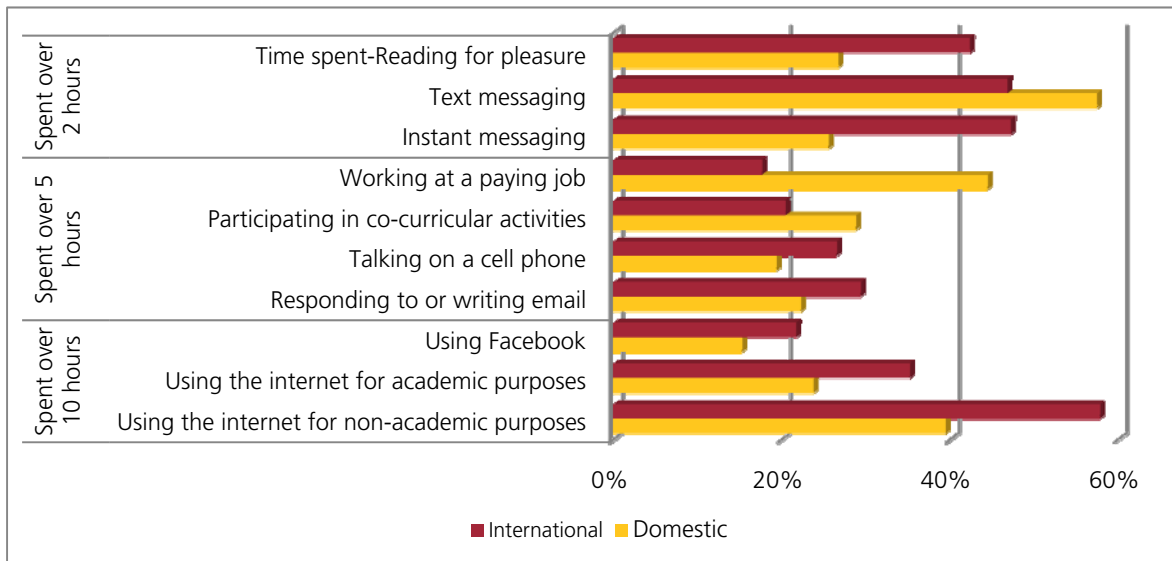
Turning to global learning, international students engage in more global-related activities than domestic students both in-class and out-of-class despite their tendency to talk less about those issues to other students and to faculty (Chart 3.5). A major factor in the degree to which international students learn about global issues at USC, and indeed how much they get out of their entire USC experience, is fitting into the USC culture (i.e., acculturation and socialization). About 20% report socializing mostly with other international students, 20% report socializing mostly with American students, and about 51% report socializing with the two groups about equally. It is the latter group that reports significantly higher levels of global literacy, awareness of cultural differences, and overall satisfaction with their USC experience.

**Chart 3.5: Comparing International and Domestic Students on Reported Behavior**

Note: Scores could range from 1 (Never) to 5 (very often)

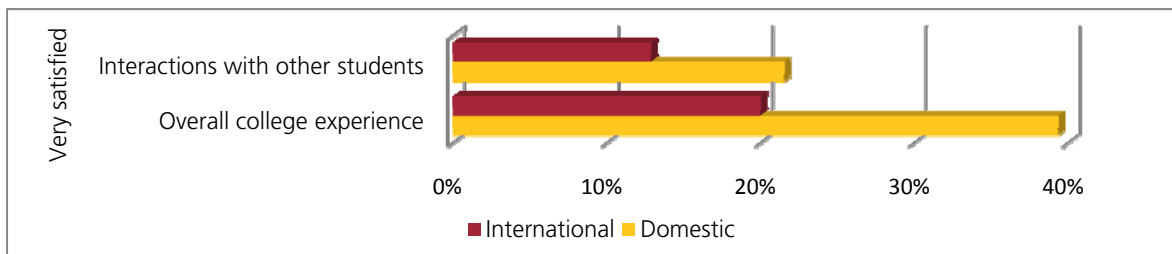


**Chart 3.6: Comparing International and Domestic Students on Time Allocation per Week**



**Chart 3.7: Comparing International and Domestic Students on Satisfaction**

Note: Scores range from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied)



## Challenges and Recommendations

USC offers hundreds of options for international studies and engagement and has developed a set of student learning objectives for global learning. Faculty members are engaged, curricular options and programs are rich, support is available, and students are eager for international experience. The student body is diverse, including the largest number of international students of any university in the nation. With these resources come challenges – in particular:

1. Students will follow the lead of their faculty. Where global perspectives, topics, and issues are reflected in what professors teach, students will be more apt to pursue global learning. It is important that faculty take the lead in developing further an academically rich vision of global learning aligned to the new learning objectives. This should prompt faculty to review their courses in order to integrate global topics where appropriate. In this vein, the 2010 CAPT report recommended development of a Global Studies major – a recommendation that should be discussed in the context of all USC majors/minors dealing with global studies.
2. Students will also follow the lead of admission counselors, student service mentors, and academic advisors. Everyone who works with students in curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular settings needs to show similar awareness and commitment to global perspectives. Student service professionals should review and rethink how they pursue their missions from the perspective of education in a global context.
3. For the foreseeable future, the Global Scholars program will need to be the focal point for advancing USC's global learning objectives. This program will play an important role in promulgating USC's global learning objectives. Students applying for the Global Scholars award and the *Global Honors* designation need clearer criteria for global scholarship.
4. Increasing visibility for the myriad of international options and opportunities will be a challenge. Is there a way for students to get comprehensive information on these options from one place, virtual or otherwise? The CAPT report recommended greater central oversight in this area. USC's incoming Vice Provost for Global Initiatives will lead this effort.
5. International students have special needs to which faculty and staff must be sensitive. USC's desire to grow this population carries responsibility to respond to their needs. Should there be an International Center on campus where students can meet? Is USC's internationally-themed Residential College at Parkside achieving its mission; how might its effectiveness be enhanced? What about the needs of international students to find off-campus housing; to adjust to new academic conventions and contexts; to find work during and after enrollment; and, to enjoy full and fulfilling social lives? How might the University more effectively address those needs, both physically and virtually?



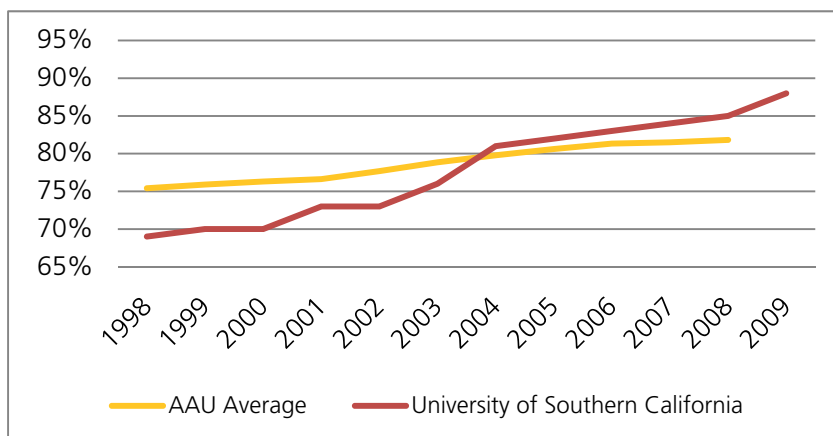
Students Katherine Goar & Sidney Hopson  
in ALUMNI PARK  
photo by Philip Channing

# Essay 4 – Academically-Centered Approaches to Student Success

## Rationale

This essay deals with institutional efforts to improve retention and graduation rates. USC has developed an “academically-centered” approach to student success over the past 12 years, the main thrust of which is to deal with retention and graduation as educational issues that require intervention by those with whom students interact in academic contexts. Problems are addressed first by faculty, advisors, and student service professionals as opposed to individuals from offices far removed or disconnected from students’ academic lives. The more student success issues are addressed in academic settings, the more likely they will be positively resolved. Six-year graduation rates rose from 70% in 1998 to 88% in 2008 and 2009. The University has just confirmed a graduation rate of 89% for 2010.

**Chart 4.1: Six year freshman graduation rates 1998-2009: USC vs. AAU Average**



**Chart 4.2: First-time academic probation and academic disqualification**

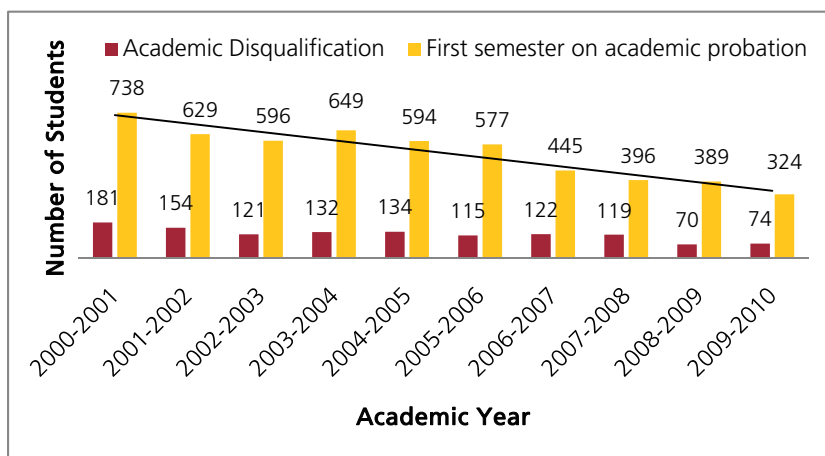


Chart 4.1 displays USC’s six-year graduation rate compared to that average for all AAU’s from 1998-2009. Chart 4.2 shows the drop in the numbers of students on first-time probation and academically disqualified from 2000-2010. Together, these charts provide context for USC’s efforts with student success.

After more than a year of study of contemporary student retention and graduation literature as well as local factors that contribute to student retention and student attrition, the Provost convened a Retention and Graduation Task Force in 2006 and charged it to identify ways to increase graduation rates to 90% or higher. The Task Force has primary responsibility for planning initiatives, distributing data to units, and monitoring the progress of all undergraduates including transfer students. It performs an essential feedback role by getting relevant data in the hands of people who can use it. The Vice Provost for Enrollment Policy and Management chairs the Task Force. It meets monthly during the academic year and includes key representatives from academic units.

Over the past decade, USC has created a strong culture of accountability across academic units and administrative levels. Long before student success became a national headline, USC saw retention and graduation as key parts of educational effectiveness, and as prime areas where public accountability must be demonstrated. The origins of this culture can be traced back to 1998 (the last year USC was reaccruited) when the Provost appointed a Director of Retention. Within a year that position was renamed Director of Undergraduate Programs, a change that marked a shift in philosophy to a more academically-centered approach. More recently, the position was vested with expanded responsibilities and elevated to the Vice Provost level.

From 1998-2004, retention efforts funded by the Provost included Learning Communities (USC College), Freshman Mentoring (Viterbi), and Freshman Cohorts (Marshall). Other initiatives not funded by the Provost included expanded academic advising in the Annenberg School. During that time, the University also established mandatory training for academic advisors across the University and new tracking protocols for reporting and following up with continuing students not registered for a subsequent term. The reporting protocols assigned primary responsibility for student success to individual schools and departments.

For over ten years, the University has carefully tracked persistence and graduation by semester. The Provost sets annual targets for the University and for each individual school. The chair of the Retention and Graduation Task Force and the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs interact regularly with leaders in

academic units, sharing data with people who work directly with students. In turn, individuals in academic units provide valuable insight back through the Task Force from their vantage points. New resources are added as needed. This level of coordination and feedback insures that what is learned is targeted and shared quickly with people who can best help USC students.

The University is proud of its success in this area. In 1998, the six-year graduation rate stood at 70% and the retention rate of that year's returning freshmen class was 94.7%. Within five years, the six-year graduation rate climbed to 80% while the retention of 2002 freshmen into the second year remained steady at 94.7%. By 2008 and 2009 the six-year graduation rate had advanced to 88% and reached 89% this year, marking additional considerable gains. The rate of freshmen returning in 2008 also improved to 96.6%. More promising, the first-semester retention rate for the Fall 2009 freshman cohort is 99.4%; meaning only 18 students out of 2,867 did not register for the Spring 2010 semester. The first-year retention rate for the 2009 cohort will be available by the time of the WASC accreditation team's site visit.

Three related improvements in student success are worth noting as well. First, time to degree has improved. The average time it takes a USC undergraduate to earn a bachelor's degree dropped from 4.1 years for students graduating in 2003 to 4.0 years in 2008. This is significant given the overall increase in students completing more than one major (see Essay 1) over the last several years. Second, the four-year graduation rate for transfer students matriculating to USC with junior status stands at 87%. Transfer students make up a significant portion of the USC student body – about one-third of graduates annually. Providing excellent service to transfer students is good for those students, the University, and society. This will continue as a top priority. Finally, for the 2003 freshmen cohort, the USC "extended graduation rate," which takes into account students who leave the University and graduate elsewhere within six years, is at least 90%. While the University does not like to see students leave, each year some ask for help in applying elsewhere. When a student decides to continue her/his studies at another college, the focus becomes helping that student reach those goals. That includes providing recommendations and extra information to help explain curriculum to the new institution.

## **Objectives**

The University is committed to reaching and sustaining a graduation rate more than 90% in the near future and is on the threshold of meeting that goal. Efforts will not stop there. There is still much to learn and achieve. Changes to the student body will require flexible thinking and more nimble approaches as new challenges arise. USC continues to enroll significant numbers of underrepresented minority students (20-23% of the incoming freshman class for each of the past four years), first-generation students (10-12% of the incoming freshman class over the same period), and international students. The freshman international student population has seen remarkable growth, rising from 6% to 11% of the incoming freshman class from 2008 to 2009 – from 166 to 316 freshmen students in one year. The Retention and Graduation Task Force looks closely at this group and will continue to coordinate student success initiatives as USC's student body changes.

Success will depend on understanding what does and does not work. The focus on retention and graduation starts with each student's educational goals. Continued progress rests on three underpinnings: 1) outstanding faculty, curriculum, and educational programs; 2) improvement in the quality of USC's incoming classes; and, 3) systems of quality assurance that guarantee students receive the support they need to succeed. The first,

academic excellence has been the focus throughout much of USC's reaccreditation, and need not be reviewed further here. The second, the quality of incoming classes, is the top priority of the Office of Admission. Admission counselors work closely with faculty in academic units, which has led to a remarkable rise in the quality of USC's incoming classes and higher yield rates. Increased interest from prospective students and more applications have translated into lower admission rates. Improvements in the academic preparedness and the diversity of the University's incoming classes provide the groundwork for future success.

The remainder of this essay examines the third foundation – systems of quality assurance that guarantee USC students receive support when facing challenges. A key tool in these efforts is a new web-based Advisement Database which provides advisors with up-to-date information enabling them to assist students more effectively than ever before. The Database was developed by the Office of Undergraduate Programs with input from advisors across campus and 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, grade point average, and photograph. The Database has an email function that allows advisors to communicate easily with students and allows students to make appointments online. Advisors can also run reports on their students – for example, students entering their fourth year who have not completed a general education or foreign language skill-level requirement, or a list of students deemed “at-risk” in a course during the current term. Training sessions are required for all university advisors, and, as system use has grown, advisor feedback has led to ongoing improvements to the system. The Advisement Database is an efficient and flexible tool that has allowed USC to develop and implement several new ways to help students succeed.

The University has developed four strategies to improve success of all freshman-entry and transfer students. Three utilize the Advisement Database; the other is the product of a joint venture between academic units and Student Affairs. They are:

- Course plans for students
- Checking-in with “at-risk” students
- Checking-in with international students
- Contacting students who do not re-register

## Evidence

An extensive data portfolio on retention and graduation is attached as part of Appendix C. Data are disaggregated by academic unit, class level, and gender and ethnicity. Transfer graduation rates are also tracked as are rates for international students and other special admits through the Structured Curriculum Program (SCP), which includes students who show promise in some specialized realm but may need enhanced support. The closer USC has moved to reaching the 90% six-year graduation rate threshold, the clearer it is that surpassing that mark will depend on more individualized involvement by advisors, faculty, and other student mentors. Continued success will require identifying students who might be at risk of not graduating because of inadequate course planning, poor performance in class, feeling disconnected and/or isolated, or not seeking help when needed. Strategies put into place to address student success issues have reinforced USC's culture of accountability – the collective commitment to help all students achieve their goals.

Course plans for students: Following the introduction of the Advisement Database, all academic units and departments were asked to produce multiyear course plans for their students. A course plan is a simple semester-by-semester list of a student's remaining requirements for an intended program of study. It provides an academic "roadmap" to ensure that students are aware of their remaining requirements and that the proposed program of study can be completed in a timely manner.

Advisors are required to update course plans following the third and fifth semesters of each student's enrollment at USC – two points when one might expect a student to select or change majors. The records of all freshman and transfer admits are audited. Requirements for general education, majors, and minors are plotted into a student's remaining semesters to graduation. Course plans also highlight issues an advisor thinks may affect a student's progress (i.e., changing majors or degree objectives, staying on track in a curricular sequence). Course plans are available on the Advisement Database and can be updated by any advisor a student chooses to meet with. Once completed, students are emailed a copy so they can check the information themselves, including the expected date of graduation. Students may also view the most recent course plan online. This process is repeated each time a student's course plan is updated. This helps keep students informed of their progress and keep track of those that change or add programs.

This process was introduced in Spring 2008. As of Fall 2009, all USC undergraduate records, including those of transfer students, had been audited. Progress to completing student audits of this kind is monitored centrally. Each unit must submit a report showing how many students were audited, how many of those students have not declared a major, students who are not enrolled for the subsequent term, and any student for whom a course plan was not completed. The report also lists expected graduation terms for the whole population. The reports serve an important function in strengthening the culture of accountability within academic units. The performance of each academic unit is monitored. Some are exemplary – the Annenberg School, Theatre, and small humanities programs are recent examples; others receive feedback detailing deficiencies.

By the end of the Fall 2009 semester, every one of USC's over 16,000 undergraduates had a course plan on file which could be viewed by students' departmental advisors and other advisors if students add a second emphasis or otherwise decide to change or add to their program of study. While there is little by way of direct evidence of a causal link between course plans and graduation rates, constructing course plans encourages good advisement practice, prompts essential dialogue between students and advisors, and serves as an important monitoring tool.

"At-risk" students – mid-semester progress reports: Faculty are asked to provide mid-semester progress reports to help identify students who are "at-risk" of doing poorly in their classes by the middle of each term. The "at-risk" designation is listed on the Advisement Database and can be viewed by academic advisors so they can follow-up with students. The label does not become part of a student's permanent record.

Various constituencies within the University have tried for over a decade to monitor student performance during the term – i.e., athletics, Structured Curriculum, and various units. The University also requires that every student be informed of their status by midterm. These efforts were largely uncoordinated and painstaking until the introduction of the Advisement Database and a central electronic Grading and Roster System. Now faculty can login and place notations by students who are "at-risk" or "not-at-risk." They also enter the "midterm percent" (representing the proportion of coursework completed to that point) and have

the option of adding a “midterm comment” (for example, “failed midterm exam”). This information is updated and displayed on each student’s course history, providing faculty and staff advisors with up-to-date information on student performance. Some factors determining how advisors follow-up with students include whether poor performance in a particular course might impede graduation or whether multiple courses have “at-risk” notations.

This new protocol provides an effective early warning that is critical in efforts to intervene with students who need help. Advisors try to identify problems at an early stage, so they can offer academic and counseling support. Midterm progress reports are an important tool, since they allow advisors to identify individual students who may be struggling in one or more classes in a term. Early contact allows students to get back on track before the end of the term.

As Table 4.1 below illustrates, this new practice is gaining wide faculty acceptance. Midterm grade notices were received for over 70% of undergraduates during the Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 terms, more than double the response rate from Fall 2008 when the practice began.

**Table 4.1: USC Undergraduate Mid-Semester Standing Reporting**

	Course Sections	Sections with Grades Reported	Percentage of Sections with Grades Reported	Individual Grades Expected	Individual Grades Reported	Percentage of Expected Individual Grades Reported
Fall 2008	2,108	875	41.5%	62,214	24,559	39.5%
Spring 2009	2,639	1,453	55.1%	69,359	38,771	55.9%
Fall 2009	2,810	1,946	69.3%	78,023	55,874	71.6%
Spring 2010	2,763	1,974	71.4%	72,597	52,472	72.3%

Mid-semester Progress Reports are relatively new but seem to be having a strong positive impact. From Fall 2008 to Fall 2009, the number of students landing on first-time probation dropped by 25%. Use of the Advisement Database for reporting midterm performance began in Fall 2008 with a 30% faculty response rate. The response rate jumped to 55% by Spring 2009. The response rate for Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 was over 70%. Similar improvements are hoped for next term.

Monitoring progress for international students: International students face special challenges adjusting to college. They comprise 11% of the 2009 incoming freshman class – 316 students. USC enrolled 1,672 international undergraduates this year. Faculty and staff check in with international students in classes, during advisement sessions or personal conferences, and in residence halls to see if they are adjusting to their new surroundings. The University recognizes that the decision to enroll more international students carries with it the responsibility to address their unique needs. It is important to be sensitive to these factors and to keep contact with these students. Coordination with Student Affairs and Residential Life is vital since professionals in residence halls are able to meet with these students more frequently and in more informal contexts.

International students face a number of challenges at USC which sometimes negatively impact their overall experience. They face academic, cultural, language, and other challenges that can put them at greater risk for not graduating. The Student Engagement Survey conducted by Student Affairs often shows a lower degree of satisfaction with the USC experience for international students compared to domestic students. Almost all USC's peer institutions report similar discrepancies in overall satisfaction rates, so USC is not unique in this regard. Even so, the University is committed to making additional progress in this area.

An ongoing challenge for international students is that of acculturation and socialization. There are a number of acculturation courses and workshops offered by various departments and schools across campus, most notably the Center for Academic Support's course, "The United States: An American Culture Series," which was lauded by the *Los Angeles Times* as a national model for supporting international students. Nonetheless, acculturation remains a difficult process, compounded by the fact that many international students have struggled with socialization even in their home countries, as they have been intensely focused on academics from a young age. Subsequently, even though there are many opportunities for international students to engage with domestic students (classes, residence halls, cafeterias, arts and sporting events, clubs, extracurricular and online activities), it can be challenging for international students to make American friends, and they often end up spending their time with students from their home countries.

In addition to the social and cultural challenges, there are also significant academic challenges, similar to the challenges reported at benchmark universities. For many students from China, Korea, and Taiwan, English language proficiency is their biggest obstacle to academic success. The level of English language that students encounter in their USC classes is often higher than anything they have experienced before. For students struggling with English language proficiency, USC offers the USC Language Academy, which meets daily at the University Religious Center. There are also issues connected with academic integrity, especially plagiarism, as students may find that their traditional mode of operation constitutes unethical behavior in an American academic context. International students also express concern with the labor-intensive nature of the coursework and the quicker pace of courses compared to their home countries. The academic push for interdisciplinary pedagogy can also cause stress, since international students often come from education systems emphasizing greater specialization in specific disciplines.

To mitigate the impact of these challenges, the Retention and Graduation Task Force asked that all international students in USC residences be contacted by a Resident Advisor (RA) to check in and see how they were adjusting. USC's Office of Residential Education partnered with the Office of International Students to create a "discussion script" focusing on five areas. RAs were provided with questions to prompt conversation in each area. The five areas include:

- Integration: Questions address the move-in experience, integration into the residential community, and ability to navigate campus.
- Health and Wellness: Questions address culture shock, homesickness, dietary needs, and activities to alleviate stress.
- Academics: Questions address successes, challenges, language barriers, etc.
- Support Systems: Questions address on/off campus support systems and holiday plans.
- Student Involvement: Questions address hobbies/interests and involvement on campus.

After their meetings with students, RAs are asked to input their findings into a database to identify patterns of concern which might be addressed on a larger scale. The findings can be helpful in revealing unanticipated needs and meeting them proactively. Whenever RAs interact with students and identify a need for additional support and/or resources, they assist those students right away in responding to these needs.

For Fall 2009, 273 students were interviewed. One question asked students how they relieve stress. Answers receiving over 40% positive response included: listening to music (56%), working out (45%), surfing the internet (44%), and talking to family (42%). Asked about support systems both on and off-campus, responses included: family (67%), resident advisors (66%), on-campus friends from the U.S. (63%), roommates (58%), on-campus friends from other countries or from their home country (47% and 59%, respectively), and friends off campus (42%). The 2010 Student Engagement Survey shows that 72% of international students report having close American friends. While there is more work to do to lessen stress and increase support, the variety of positive responses is encouraging.

The 2009 group of new international undergraduates reported a high degree of satisfaction with their move-in experience and their relationships with roommates, neighbors, and other students in the community, with 91% saying they were *satisfied* or *extremely satisfied* with their move-in experience and 91% reporting the same with regard to their relationships with roommates, neighbors, and other students. These types of check-ins will continue next Fall.

Contacting students who do not re-register: For over 10 years, the University has compiled lists of enrolled students not registered for a subsequent semester and distributed them to academic units for follow-up. Some of the reasons students fail to re-enroll include technical trouble registering, changed family or individual financial circumstances, advisement or academic holds, collections holds, or more personal issues. Advisors were asked to contact these non-registered students to ascertain what has prevented them from continuing their studies and to help counsel students about their options – for example, take an official leave of absence, request additional financial aid, or lift a collections hold on their registration, etc. Much of this follow-up was facilitated by distributing long lists which did not contain the most current information (i.e., whether a student registered or dropped all courses after the lists were generated).

With the introduction of the Advisement Database in August 2007, the process has become more efficient by allowing advisors to have real-time information on a student's status. The Advisement Database can be used to identify continuing students who do not re-enroll in a subsequent semester which enables advisors to assist those students in a timely manner. With the information provided to academic units, advisors contact students, monitor their circumstances, and report information back centrally. Advisors help students weigh their options, provide referrals to appropriate departments, and continue to monitor students until they have registered or their status is otherwise "cleared." Quite often the Retention and Graduation Task Force has been able to address student needs with extra financial help, interventions with collections, and counseling support. Other refinements over the past two years make it possible to track the final status of students who do not re-register but might otherwise be on track to graduate.

With the help of the Advisement Database during the three semester transitions in the 2008-2010 academic years, academic advisors and other professional staff were able to collect information and determine the status of over 99% of the more than 16,000 undergraduates each term. That includes direct advisor contacts each term with nearly 2,000 students who, at some point, were in the unregistered pool. For each of those

semester transitions re-enrollments exceeded those of the same term from the previous year. This is noteworthy given economic challenges that many families faced during the past two years.

As an example, for the transition from Fall 2009 to Spring 2010, 1,977 undergraduates who were enrolled in the Fall term did not register initially for the Spring (excluding students who did not re-register because they graduated). Attempts were made to contact every one of these students to offer assistance – help with petitions, counseling, resources, etc. Of the 1,977, USC was able to “clear” the status of 1,669 students:

- 1,399 (70.8%) eventually registered
- 196 (9.9%) ultimately graduated at the end of the Fall 2009 term
- 30 (1.5%) enrolled at another institution to complete the final requirement for graduation
- 44 (2.2%) were academically disqualified

The status of another 248 was deemed known but in some way “pending” – i.e., submitted a request for leave of absence (195 – 9.9%) or decided to transfer to another institution (32 – 1.6%); had financial difficulties that could not be addressed (16 – 0.8%); left for professional sports (4 – 0.2%); or, were suspended or expelled (1). The final status of the remaining 60 students (3.0%) was deemed “unknown.” The Retention and Graduation Task Force is already busy tracking students who have not re-registered for the Fall 2010 semester. This updated process allows central tracking and more detailed understanding of obstacles to student persistence which may include institutional practice or other elements that can be addressed and improved. Additional data regarding these efforts is included in Appendix B.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Early on in the University’s efforts to improve retention and graduation, major gains were readily achieved, as evidenced by quick improvements in graduation rates from 1998 to 2004 (from 70% to 82%). Confidence exists university-wide that a 90% graduation rate will be reached. The University will continue to be aggressive once that threshold is passed. It will take much effort to achieve smaller but very significant gains for students, their families, and the university community. What are the challenges USC faces?

1. The development of a strong culture of accountability and student support described in this essay will thrive to the extent that collaboration between units and offices grows. It will be important to avoid the kind of “silo” mentality that sometimes exists in large institutions. A balance must be found between priorities within units and focus on the common good.
2. A large transfer population is in some quarters considered anathema to the goals of private research universities. USC sees its transfer class as a mark of distinction and a point of pride both academically and socially. The University’s concern and level of service for all students must continue to move toward parity regardless of whether students enroll as freshmen or transfer into USC.
3. The introduction of the Advisement Database brought about changes in how advisors are trained. This provides an opportunity to build on best practices in individual units and provide an important feedback loop as advisors share insights that might help improve the system.
4. Targeted interventions and collaboration made possible by the Advisement Database raise the ante in terms of expectations for advisors, particularly with regard to the level of academic immersion and engagement. The role of advisement is critical to students. Advising students well includes three cardinal duties: 1) to provide students with timely and accurate information; 2) to counsel students

when concerns arise and to help them make sense of their experience; and, 3) to actively connect students to faculty and the academic sphere. Significant improvement has been made in each of these areas, much of it facilitated by the advent of the Advisement Database. But more can and should be done to bolster the third area where advisors serve an important liaison role, linking students to academic programs and faculty. Explicitly connecting these dedicated advisors and student mentors to the heart of the academic mission and connecting faculty to work done in the co-curriculum can be a national mark of distinction for the University.