



MEMORANDUM

Office of the Provost

C. L. Max Nikias
Provost and
Senior Vice
President for
Academic Affairs

To: Academic Deans, Faculty, and Staff
From: C. L. Max Nikias *C. L. Nikias*
Date: March 14, 2006
Subject: Undergraduate Student Quality and the USC Experience

I would like to offer some perspective on the size and quality of our undergraduate student community that is essential to understanding our responsibility as USC's faculty and staff.

USC made a choice many years ago to be one of the larger private research universities in the nation, and it has remained true to that choice. Why has this been the case? Because our size and scope are essential to our mission and are necessary for creating the experience and impact that USC has achieved.

Our commitment to our size and breadth remained steadfast even as President Sample launched an ambitious effort to boost the strength of our student body. His goal was to ensure that the university would be better able to compete with its peers for academic and financial resources. As we have noted before, perhaps no other university has risen so quickly in reputation, especially in the area of the reputation of its student body, as USC has over the past decade.

We still have room to continue increasing the overall academic quality of our student body, while maintaining the spectrum of talents that is so important to us. We are now ready to implement a plan to further raise the freshman class's SAT math and verbal average while continuing to attract a diverse group of students who are leaders, involved in community service, and have a broad range of talents and interests.

Incoming freshman classes at USC already boast higher SAT averages than counterparts at many of the nation's most prestigious public and private universities. But the more relevant measure of quality is how we compare to elite private universities of the very top rank. Bear in mind that most such schools have significantly smaller undergraduate student bodies than our own: the freshman classes at most elite private universities are between 5% and 55% of the size of USC's freshman class.

If we had chosen to limit the size of USC's freshman class to that of many other elite private schools we would have a freshman class as strong as theirs or better, based on a comparison of SAT scores. In other words, USC today attracts as many top students as virtually any other elite private university you could name. This has significant implications for how we must shape our academic community.

We believe you will find the tables on the final page to be instructive and even surprising. Table 1 displays USC's recent rise in student quality, and also reveals the distribution of academic strength according to SAT percentile within the freshman class. This gives us a methodology with which to compare the entering classes at the nation's elite universities to similarly sized subsets at USC.

The Advantage of USC's Size and Breadth

Table 2 reveals that if USC had chosen to limit our undergraduate population's size to that of Caltech, we would have a freshman class with a higher SAT average than Caltech's. If we had chosen to be the size of Columbia, Chicago, Brown, Rice, Georgetown, Vanderbilt, Johns Hopkins or Notre Dame, our freshmen would have superior SAT scores to counterparts at those schools. In some cases, USC's edge would be five or ten points. In other cases, our edge would be closer to 50 points!

This might seem counterintuitive: one might expect the nation's top students to be interested in attending institutions where they would be surrounded only by students of similar ability, as defined by conventional SAT metrics. But such students do not shy away from USC, even though the other 50% of USC's entering classes do not boast those same numbers.

Why is this the case? We believe it is because top students understand that a USC experience offers a unique environment of breadth and depth at the academic and social levels. Those students with the widest choice of colleges increasingly judge USC as the best selection to provide them the education they want.

A Large University with a Small-College Feel

This success confirms the wisdom of USC's educational philosophy. USC has chosen to be a large, richly diverse academic community that transcends the sum of its parts. This academic community demands more than one narrow conventional metric of excellence. Outstanding talent is defined differently at a greater conservatory of the arts than at a technological institution or liberal arts college or professional school. USC uniquely bridges all these sanctuaries of excellence; therefore our students benefit from the approaches of professors from many disciplines often working together to provide creative answers to the most pressing questions that society faces.

Our challenge is how to continue to build the best possible student experience within this extraordinary academic community. Under the leadership of President Sample and an outstanding cadre of deans, USC has been able to develop a rare academic environment: *A large private university with the feel of a small college.*

USC's role as a large, research-intensive comprehensive university—strong in a range of disciplines—allows us to offer a very rich curriculum that very few peers can match. Our more than 130 minors are one example. The smaller size and scale of most elite private universities prevent them from offering the same range of academic experiences. Similarly, undergraduate students at such universities do not have the same opportunities to gain invaluable hands-on research experience at the cutting edge of scholarship.

Further Strengthening the Student Experience

We must remain energetic in building upon such strengths, especially as our ongoing efforts to further strengthen our student body will give an even stronger basis for a distinctive educational experience.

We believe our new First Contact Initiative is also crucial to maintaining "a large university with a small college feel." Similarly, our Thematic Option program remains one of the country's best undergraduate honors program, and it will remain an important part of our efforts to create a tailored, intimate learning experience for many of USC's strongest incoming students.

We also can offer countless social and leadership opportunities to students because of USC's size: we now are host to more than 600 student organizations that allow students to find numerous places in which they can serve and contribute. This, in turn, prepares them to become an active part of one of academia's greatest traditions: the Trojan Family and its lifelong and worldwide alumni network.

Our faculty continue to develop technology-enhanced learning initiatives, and we have plans underway to improve information services, which will further enhance the living and learning experiences of USC's students. Our students also can expand their knowledge and insight through participation in various service-learning opportunities and overseas study and research.

The strengthening of the student experience requires the strengthening of the faculty experience. USC is in the process of recruiting twelve influential and innovative scholars to build up our interdisciplinary educational and research programs. These prominent scholars will hold active joint appointments at several schools, helping to model to our students the essence of Renaissance men and women.

USC, as a leader in both the artistic and technological aspects of contemporary media, is better suited than any other college or university to redefine what literacy entails for a young person in this digital era. Guided by the vision of cinema alumnus George Lucas, we are establishing an initiative to bring the learning of multimedia literacy into our core undergraduate curriculum—an innovation with unprecedented educational potential that is possible only because of the partnership between the USC College and the USC School of Cinema-Television.

Few universities have USC's strength in the arts or a similar location in a cultural mecca. Our new Arts & Humanities Initiative is turning this advantage into a transforming, university-wide educational asset.

All these endeavors reveal USC's commitment to creating a 21st century educational model that is needed at all universities—regardless of size. President Sample has declared it an overriding goal for USC to provide national leadership in shaping Renaissance men and women of the 21st century, and that goal is within reach if we continue to accelerate our momentum at this juncture in our history.

Although this is a significant responsibility that falls on our shoulders as educators, we should recognize the opportunity each of us has to thrive in such a dynamic intellectual and creative community. In the coming year we hope to discuss with you many other new initiatives that we can undertake as part of the ongoing reinvention of the American research university.

Attachment

cc: Steven B. Sample
Todd R. Dickey
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SAT SCORE COMPARISONS

Table 1: SAT Scores for USC Freshmen (by Percentile)

	Fall 2000		Fall 2005	
	# Students	Average SAT	# Students	Average SAT
Total New Freshmen	2916	1308	2,741	1364
Top 5%	146	1523	137	1542
Top 15%	437	1464	411	1501
Top 25%	729	1430	685	1475
Top 35%	1,021	1403	959	1455
Top 45%	1,312	1381	1,233	1436
Top 55%	1,604	1360	1,508	1419
100%	2,916	1308	2,741	1364

Note: The average GPA for USC freshmen has risen from 3.88 (Fall '00) to 4.04 (Fall '05)

Table 2: SATs at Peer Universities and USC (by Comparable Class Size)

Institution	Actual Freshman Class 2005	SAT	Comparable USC Average SAT
California Institute of Technology	200	1510	1526
Rice University (TX)	698	1435	1472
Massachusetts Inst. of Technology	1,001	1485	1452
Columbia University (NY)	1,027	1435	1450
Dartmouth College (NH)	1,092	1455	1446
Johns Hopkins University (MD)	1,133	1395	1442
University of Chicago	1,231	1430	1436
Princeton University (NJ)	1,231	1465	1436
Emory University (GA)	1,284	1380	1433
Tufts University (MA)	1,300	1380	1432
Brown University (RI)	1,469	1415	1423
Georgetown University (DC)	1,530	1375	1417
Vanderbilt University (TN)	1,607	1355	1413
Stanford University (CA)	1,632	1460	1411
Northwestern University (IL)	1,960	1410	1389
University of Notre Dame (IN)	1,996	1375	1387