



MEMORANDUM

To: Academic Deans, Faculty, and Staff
From: C. L. Max Nikias
Date: February 16, 2006
Subject: First Contact Initiative

Office of the Provost

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

I am delighted to announce a new initiative that will nurture and enhance interactions between our faculty and students, particularly in a student's first years at USC. Our students have always been at the core of President Sample's vision for our future: their personal and intellectual growth drives the ambitions outlined in our new strategic plan.

USC strives to provide a small-college experience within the context of a major research university. Students should have opportunities to interact directly with faculty and to find mentors on campus to guide them as they make important decisions. This new **First Contact Initiative** significantly bolsters these efforts, particularly in combination with other initiatives our schools are undertaking to enhance the undergraduate experience.

To give you a better sense of this initiative, I want to describe key areas in which our efforts are currently concentrated. These are vital components of the initiative and will form the foundation of our present efforts.

Advisement

The First Contact Initiative will target student advisement. On this point, it is perhaps useful to distinguish between two types of advisement: tactical and strategic, both of which are essential for the success of our students. Tactical advisement includes helping students in planning their schedules, in developing time management techniques, and in making use of the university's vast resources. Strategic advisement, meanwhile, has a strong mentorship component and includes helping students in their long-term career planning, in formulating life goals, and in developing as well-rounded individuals.

USC's current tactical advisement system is strong: our well-trained professional advisors guide students during registration and in planning their degrees. Meanwhile, the Office of Undergraduate Programs, in coordination with the schools, has been quite successful in boosting our retention rates. We are in good shape, but we can do more.

First, we will move toward establishing a **university-wide advisement database**. This database, with security similar to the current one used for registration records, will allow the transfer of data between schools and units. This will simplify the process when students change majors and safeguard against loss of records due to staff turnover. A software consultant has already been identified, and this spring the Office of Undergraduate Programs will work in consultation with the units to develop a database which allows for increased accountability, but maintains the flexibility required for our diverse needs.

Second, our professional staff will focus increasingly on **proactive advisement**. They will review their school's list of students at the end of each semester, identifying those whose grades have fallen or who face delinquent bills. This will allow them to reach out to our students and resolve potential problems as effectively as possible.

Third, our students will undergo a **progress audit** at the end of their third and fifth semesters of residency. They will meet with their professional advisors and receive a written estimate of the time to degree within their current major. These meetings will help facilitate a change-of-major for students, and they will provide students with an accurate sense of where they stand in terms of fulfilling their degree requirements.

A task force on advisement, led by Gene Bickers, our associate vice provost for undergraduate programs, is coordinating these multi-school efforts. We will assess our progress through improvements in retention, earlier intervention to help students facing challenges, and greater student satisfaction with advising.

Signature Events

The First Contact Initiative will be defined by a number of signature events. This will include the introduction of **micro-seminars**, structured on the model of conventional ten-week Freshman Seminars, but limited in time to four contact hours. These will be scheduled primarily during Welcome Week—before academic demands reach their peak. We envision limiting student enrollment to 20 students per section, and the topics will be drawn from a range of areas, including the sciences, the arts, and pop culture.

These micro-seminars will allow our students—at the outset of their college careers—to spend several hours in the company of a faculty member discussing a chosen interest. The environment will be relaxed: grades will not be assigned, and unit credit will not be involved.

Other universities tend to design the academic component of their Welcome Weeks around a single book or idea. USC will offer a unique menu of options, allowing students to choose topics that inspire them creatively and intellectually.

The First Contact Initiative will also increase the number of **events** that allow students and faculty or alumni to interact outside the classroom. Our faculty and alumni are a tremendous resource in providing strategic advisement and mentoring for our students, and we have already organized a number of events that tap into this invaluable resource.

This week, more than 250 students heard an interdisciplinary panel talk about love, and last fall, the Office of Undergraduate Programs sponsored the first in a series of faculty panel events devoted to strategic career planning, entitled “Thinking about a Career in...: A Conversation with Faculty.” The first event, which focused on the legal profession, brought together a group of four outstanding faculty from the Gould School of Law and roughly 40 students, while drawing on the expertise of the Undergraduate Pre-Law Association and the College Office of Academic Advising. Events similar to this one are being continued this spring with the sponsorship of additional panels, targeted at students with an interest in the clinical and research aspects of medicine, in entrepreneurship, and in the professoriate.

In addition, the Office of Undergraduate Programs has already co-sponsored an event with the Academic Honors Assembly (AHA) of the Undergraduate Student Senate. This event, which drew a crowd of about 200 students, promoted research opportunities for undergraduates. Roughly 10 faculty were on hand to

describe research in their groups and to network with students. We are planning additional events this spring in partnership with the AHA and with student organizations focused on business and medicine.

As part of its signature events, the First Contact Initiative will also build on the success of the **Academic Culture Initiative (ACI)**, establishing it as a permanent part of our work. For the past five years, Professor Mark Kann of the College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences has led this university-wide initiative to improve the academic culture on campus. The ACI has sponsored dinners, book salons, lectures, and special events, while providing support for faculty-student lunches and dinners through the “Breaking Bread” program. The ACI has also extended the remarkable camaraderie of students in the Thematic Option program to a larger group of students. This initiative has been tremendously successful under Professor Kann’s leadership, and we plan to incorporate its events into our future programming.

Elizabeth Garrett, our vice provost for academic affairs, will appoint an advisory committee to work with Associate Vice Provost Bickers to oversee the implementation of the First Contact Initiative’s signature events. This advisory committee will consist of the academic deans of the schools that include undergraduate students, a representative of the Faculty Senate, a residential college faculty fellow, and representatives from student affairs and admissions. In addition to providing feedback, this advisory committee will make certain that our efforts complement what the schools are already doing on their own. The committee will also evaluate the success of the micro-seminars as a component in orientation and consider additional changes to enhance this “first contact” for our students. Our success with these events will be gauged by student attendance and by feedback, which we will gather systematically.

Fund for Innovative Undergraduate Teaching

In addition to signature events, we will enhance the curriculum of our first year students through the Fund for Innovative Undergraduate Teaching. Since 1999, this fund has supported initiatives across the undergraduate curriculum; however, during the current proposal cycle, the fund is devoted specifically to projects which affect students in their first year of study.

First-year courses provide a crucial opportunity to encourage a culture of academic excellence and to inspire a passion for lifelong learning. The first-year curriculum at USC is presently enriched by a varied menu of Freshman Seminars, small sections within the General Education Program, and broad survey courses which introduce students to a specific discipline. The allocation of this year’s funds, in conjunction with our efforts with the Center for Excellence in Teaching, will surely strengthen the already-vibrant curriculum that awaits our first-year students.

In closing, I want to emphasize that the components described above only offer a glimpse of the possibilities provided by the First Contact Initiative. In fall planning meetings, we will ask the deans of the various units about the programs they currently have in place. Our efforts in this area will continue to evolve, but our focus will always be the same: to offer our students the best education and the richest experience possible. Along with efforts already underway in the schools, this initiative reflects the university’s unwavering commitment to its students and its strong dedication to their development. It echoes President Sample’s call for excellence and advances his lofty vision for our future.

cc: Steven B. Sample
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