



Students in USC's School of Cinematic Arts and School of Dramatic Arts work together to create a video celebrating the launch of the USC Kaufman School of Dance. The new school was established by Gloria Kaufman, a noted philanthropist and champion of the performing arts.



Chapter 7

USC's Secret Weapon

Arts Programs Enjoy a New Spotlight

The past century of technological and scientific progress has had a profound impact on how society, and its research universities, have viewed priorities in education. At many institutions, the arts and humanities seemed to lack the attention, energy, and resources that were being invested in the fast-growing scientific and technological fields. In recent years, as policy makers and journalists worried about the United States losing its edge in “STEM” (science, technology, engineering, and math) education, the cultural and artistic pursuits were gradually pushed even further from center stage.

USC, however, had been following a different script, thanks in large part to its long-established, renowned schools in the arts: the USC Roski School of Art and Design, the USC School of Architecture, the USC School of Cinematic Arts, the USC School of Dramatic Arts, and the USC Thornton School of Music. Within these freestanding, independent schools, USC’s arts programs enjoyed autonomy and respect rare for these disciplines at top research universities.

The term “interdisciplinarity” has been for several years a buzzword in higher education. Interdisciplinarity encourages experts from different fields to collaborate, so that in the process they might see problems from fresh perspectives and find creative solutions. As the concept of innovation also became a priority in larger society, universities recognized that new ideas are spawned most fruitfully at the intersection of different disciplines—between biology and engineering, for example, or between digital media and the arts.

But it is easier to talk about the importance of interdisciplinarity than to achieve it in a meaningful form. In its arts programs, USC houses a large engine of creative energy and a culture of experimentation and risk-taking. Often out of necessity, it developed an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration among its vast array of independent schools. By contrast, faculty at other universities have tended to work out of “silos,” or fiefdoms, jealously protecting

their turf and funding, and sometimes seeing potential collaborators as rivals.

USC was seeking to make more than a decade's worth of academic progress in just a few years at this crucial moment in time. As provost and later as president, Nikias would often describe the arts at USC as "our secret weapon." These programs, and their talented faculty and students, infused the larger academic community with imagination and a spirit of unlimited possibility, he said. In turn, students and faculty in the arts gained from access to many of the best minds in emerging technology, the sciences, social sciences, and the professions.

Infusing Creative Energy into an Entire Campus

The ongoing development of the arts and humanities at USC has reflected a key academic commitment of President Nikias, even as more research-driven disciplines increasingly dominated the higher education landscape in the United States, and more so in emerging economies such as China and India.

Nikias is certainly himself a technologist: winner of the IEEE Simon Ramo Medal, member of the National Academy of Engineering, and architect of USC's vaunted national multimedia research center (the Integrated Media Systems Center).

But he is also equal parts a humanist, and in fact was the inaugural holder of the Malcolm R. Currie Chair in Technology and the Humanities, established by the technology legend and former chair of USC's Board of Trustees. Nikias's particular expertise focuses on Greek history, literature, and theater, but he believes that for students to be properly educated and for society to prosper, the full array of the arts needs to be nurtured. "Science and technology are means toward an end," he wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "But art is our true end as fully mature human beings living in society."

Nikias's passion for the arts was such that, beginning when he was provost, he set aside time to lead seminars for incoming freshmen on the rise of Athenian democracy and drama. These intimate gatherings of 10 to 15 students were in many cases their first personal interaction with any member of the USC faculty. Since becoming president, Nikias has continued to teach these seminars, in order to give undergraduates important historical context to the cultural opportunities and experiences they will encounter at USC in their next few years.



Illustrious musician, conductor, and USC alumnus Michael Tilson Thomas leads the university's Thornton Symphony, one of the world's finest collegiate ensembles. Tilson Thomas joined the faculty in 2015 as a Judge Widney Professor.



The establishment of Visions & Voices: The Arts and Humanities Initiative in 2006 also provided substantial momentum for the arts. In announcing the program—created to leverage those studies to full educational effect across the university community—Nikias stated that the goal “is not merely to entertain audiences but to challenge them at the core of their being.” Through this series of performances, lectures, and other events programmed to include an intentional reflective component, students from every field are able to gain creative insights, a timeless understanding of human nature, and an appreciation of USC’s essential academic values.

The Visions & Voices program quickly became a standing-room-only success. Students continue to line up, sometimes for hours, for prime seats



The USC Kaufman School of Dance, established with the extraordinary support of philanthropist Glorlya Kaufman in 2012, welcomed its first class in 2015. The Kaufman School, with the accomplished dance-world veteran and educator Jodie Gates (at center) serving as its inaugural director and vice dean, represents the university's sixth independent arts school.

at events on campus and in Los Angeles's bustling cultural hot spots. Over the course of an academic year, the series typically draws more than 25,000 attendees through a rich offering of nearly a hundred programs and events.

A Vibrant Arts Curriculum

By 2015, USC had 6,000 students majoring or minoring in its arts schools, perhaps the largest such contingent at any research university. These students and their faculty alone would constitute one of the largest institutions for the creative and performing arts in the world. But rather than pursuing their individual artistic disciplines in isolation, they worked in harmony with experts across diverse fields.

As the university continued to grow as a research powerhouse, its core academic arts programs—in addition to being distinguished in their own right—increasingly gave USC faculty a strategic edge in the sciences, technology, and professions. Experts in engineering or medicine, for example, could work with experts in cinematic arts or theater to develop unique ways to monitor progress, communicate information, and deliver education.

For USC to fully exploit its secret academic weapon, it would need to invest in both strengthening its existing academic programs and developing new ones. Through a combination of high-level endowments and an overall commitment to innovations in the university's current programs, the stage was set for a renewed era of artistic progress.

Creative Movement: Dance Comes to Center Stage

In 2012, philanthropist Glorlya Kaufman pledged the largest gift in the history of American dance to establish an unprecedented sixth independent arts school at USC. At this point in its metamorphosis, the university saw the opportunity to expand the breadth of its offerings—but there was no room for



The USC School of Cinematic Arts today offers enviable technologies to train the next generation of storytellers. Cutting-edge facilities, such as the Interactive Media Building (above), were strategically designed to maximize students' and faculty members' ability to explore and collaborate with new media forms.

error in terms of quality. Any new school needed to be exceptional from the outset. Kaufman's vision and gift made this possible.

The university broke ground on the school's home in 2014, with plans to create a facility that would nurture the evolution of the venerable art. "A world-class school needs a world-class building," said Robert Cutietta, concurrently dean of the USC Thornton School of Music and the founding dean of the dance school, at the groundbreaking of the Glorja Kaufman International Dance Center. "Thanks to Ms. Kaufman's generosity, we'll have both. I can't wait to welcome our first students to this magnificent building." The 55,000-foot facility will include spaces for studio performance, five medium and small dance studios, a dance wellness center, dressing rooms, classrooms and offices for faculty and staff, and a large collaborative area for students.

The school received more than 370 applications for only 25 seats in its first freshman class, in 2015, for a selectivity rate of under 7 percent. The program also attracted outstanding faculty, including the acclaimed choreographer William Forsythe.

Miracles in the Garage

In the spring of 2014, one of USC's newest independent interdisciplinary programs sent out acceptance letters to its first class of students. And the unconventional manner in which it did so said much about its mission.



Applicants to the USC Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation needed to demonstrate the breadth of their interests and skills and succinctly express a compelling vision for tackling challenges. Each of the 31 individuals who made the cut received a personalized video from the school's founders, with the two music-industry icons warmly welcoming them into the program by name and wishing them a bright future.

Established by a historic \$70 million gift from Jimmy Iovine and Andre "Dr. Dre" Young in 2013, the program would immerse broadly talented students in the invigorating waters of the arts, sciences, and social sciences, in an environment designed to help them invent the future. On campus the facility became known as "The Garage."

The founders have described its mission as nothing less than to unleash a wave of talent like that of legendary Apple CEO Steve Jobs. They believed that the right atmosphere could summon forth such world-shaping, game-changing innovators on a regular basis. And they were convinced that USC was the place where such an investment would bear the most fruit. It served as a powerful validation of the university's "secret weapon," which was now becoming far less of a secret.

"The academy's core education will create a common, multilingual literacy and fluency across essential disciplines," said Erica Muhl, inaugural director of the program. "This 'big picture' knowledge and skill will equip graduates with a

Many of the world's greatest technological advances have blossomed in humble garages. The innovative USC Iovine and Young Academy features its own creative space, "The Garage," where talented interdisciplinary students are able to work on new pathways and breakthroughs.

President Nikias is an engineer by training but also a classicist and an advocate for the arts. Each fall, he leads entering freshmen on a two-day journey through the themes and development of ancient Athenian drama.



leadership perspective that is unparalleled in an undergraduate degree, and that will be applicable to virtually any industry.”

Innovations in Existing Arts Programs

Throughout USC’s arts enterprises, innovation has flourished. In addition to her role at the academy, Muhl has also served as dean of the USC Roski School of Fine Arts since 2012. In late 2013, the latter changed its name to the USC Roski School of Art and Design, in recognition of a broader mission that integrated it into the larger academic life of the university. “The new name represents a subtle yet momentous shift in how our students identify themselves and their work within contemporary visual culture,” Muhl said. This shift meant additions to the program at a practical level—such as a graphic design course in fashion marketing and a new minor in 3-D design—and a greater connection to the collective conversation about art and design in society at large.

The USC School of Architecture has become a more global school than many of its peers, as symbolized by its accomplished dean, Qingyun Ma, who bridges Shanghai and Los Angeles in his professional and academic practices. In 2011, President Nikias appointed the school’s acclaimed graduate Frank Gehry to the USC faculty; the designer of some of the world’s most iconic structures now serves as a Judge Widney Professor of Architecture.

The USC School of Cinematic Arts, bolstered by a \$175 million gift from famed alumnus George Lucas a few years earlier, has developed the most sophisticated infrastructure of any contemporary film school. The improvements allow it to play an influential role in the emerging mega-industry of video game design, as well as immersive and virtual reality breakthroughs in education and in training for the military. The third and final phase of construction for the school’s new facility, completed in 2013, made room to house its Interactive Media & Games Division, the Media Arts+Practice Division,



RIGHT: USC welcomed its inaugural class of International Artist Fellows in 2013. From left: Jacinto Astiazarán, a Mexican filmmaker; Vladimir Gorbach, a classical guitarist from Russia; Fei Kayser, a Chinese playwright; and Frederico Fernandez, a visual artist from Brazil.



and the leading-edge R+D labs, which focus on rapidly developing areas such as virtual, alternate, and mixed reality experiences.

International Artist Fellowship Program

USC also strengthened and leveraged its arts programs by creating additional educational opportunities at the graduate level. In 2013, the university launched the International Artist Fellowship Program, fulfilling one of the commitments Nikias had made in his 2010 inaugural speech. In that address, he proclaimed:

Let the best young minds from across the Pacific Rim compete to receive a USC education. Let us build special scholarship programs for students represented from all Pacific Rim nations. Let them take full advantage of a highly diverse environment they won't find anywhere else.

Great talent exists in America and around the Pacific Rim. Let that talent be refined in the unique intellectual crucible here, which represents a dynamic blend of the arts and humanities and culture, and cutting-edge science and technology, and social sciences and professions.

The program identifies some of the most brilliant young artistic talents, particularly from around the Pacific Rim and Latin America, and brings them to campus, where they have the funding and support necessary to experiment freely in building bridges between the arts and other fields.

The initial class attracted fellows from several nations and continents. Jacinto Astiazarán, a Tijuana native and Mexico City resident whose work has been exhibited internationally, came to further develop his skills in the use of video, dance, and other forms of performance to depict the process of cultural adaptation. Fei Kayser, a playwright from China, said she hoped to grow in

LEFT: Michael Chang, a student at the USC Roski School of Art and Design, works on an intricate watercolor painting. The oldest art institute in Southern California, the school opened its doors in 1883.



Students in the School of Dramatic Arts perform a crowd-pleasing production of the musical *Grease*. The school typically stages more than 20 shows annually.

her ability to author plays that capture the multilayered nature of life in her homeland. Vladimir Gorbach, a classical musician from Russia, described his guitar as “kind of a lonely instrument,” to which his fellowship would offer a remedy, enabling him to connect to L.A.’s active chamber music scene. And Frederico Fernandez, a Brazilian street artist, arrived with the goal of making animated films, courtesy of the vanguard technical resources in the university’s arts complex.

A Game Changer

A recurring theme in the USC story is that—although it may have lacked certain resources of other leading universities—it continually moved forward by making shrewd and mindful use of its distinct and unique advantages.

For years, USC had a far higher number of independent professional schools than rival universities—a natural result of its founding mission to educate a complete range of professionals for a fast-growing region. Some observers felt this was a handicap for USC, as it was spread across too many areas, diminishing its potential to develop any one “elite” program.

Yet as the focus in higher education has shifted in the past two decades from hyper-specialization to broad and collaborative interdisciplinarity, USC’s



Each year, Visions & Voices begins its season with a dynamic multimedia spectacle, often featuring performances from pop musicians, spoken-word artists, and street dance troupes, such as We Are Heroes, who performed at the first kickoff event, in 2011.



seeming weakness has become a strength. And this strength has been exploited through a particular strategy, in which the arts and humanities—the very programs that face neglect nationally—would be stars of the show.

While USC has helped shape our digital age, its leadership and faculty have also been determined to inject a double dose of humanism, art, and culture into this technological era. In the process, experts in every field have gained immeasurably. Through the influx of exceptional students, faculty, and practitioners, the university's secret weapon in the arts was by 2015 well on its way to becoming a truly game-changing one.