



# Epilogue

What is the University of Southern California today? And can we say with certainty what USC is on its way to becoming within the next few years?

By the early part of this decade, higher education observers covering USC described it as a university aggressively moving forward. Some spoke of it seeking to become a “Harvard of the West” or a “Stanford of the South.”

However, the university’s leaders and most passionate supporters would argue that the goal isn’t to emulate any other institutions, or even to compete directly with them. “There is no one else to chase now,” President Nikias told the faculty in his annual address in 2013. “The university’s goal now is to maintain its distinct identity and its distinct path, while accelerating the pace...all at a time when other universities are lagging due to economic constraints and other disruptions.” To use an organic image, this would allow the school to come into full flower—to complete its own particular metamorphosis.

This will mean the university will have the intellectual, cultural, and social impact of the reigning elites—but in a manner fully characteristic of the University of Southern California that Judge Widney established in 1880 through unshakable determination and relentless effort.

Providence has placed USC in one of the most promising positions imaginable, as the United States’ center of influence shifts steadily westward, and as the world’s center of influence shifts rapidly toward the Pacific. West of Chicago, USC is one of only a handful of research universities of the first rank, institutions capable of nurturing economic and cultural progress. Among those institutions, USC and Stanford are the only two research universities that are both private, and broad and comprehensive (as opposed to being narrow technical institutes). Being independently governed, they are able to adapt quickly to new intellectual needs; and being comprehensive, they enjoy special opportunities to create meaningful interdisciplinary relationships.

But additionally, USC carries several other advantages that place it in a singular position going forward.

The university’s academic community is especially national and global, with its student body representing all 50 states and 115 nations. It has long been home to more international students and alumni than any other university; and that global contingent is particularly notable, in that it includes an unrivaled number of the current and future leaders of the region that will dominate the next century—the Pacific Rim.

Los Angeles is emerging as the anchor city of the Pacific Rim and the chief hub connecting the United States to a Pacific future. And the USC community and its academic mission are already integrally and inextricably woven into the fabric of this great Pacific capital. As Nikias has told the

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The Trojan Shrine—better known as Tommy Trojan—has stood sentinel at the heart of the USC campus since 1930.

faculty, “USC is finally in a position to capitalize on its strategic location—at the center of where the action will be in this century.”

The Trojans’ astonishing athletic and Olympic heritage symbolize its commitment to the classic ideal that the ancient Greeks saw as the broad pursuit of excellence in all things—in mind, spirit, and body, and in the building of communal spirit. Few of the world’s top universities demonstrate this at the highest levels, and USC is becoming a model.

While USC has in recent decades achieved prominence in the traditional measures of quality at a research university, it also enjoys what Nikias has called its “secret weapon.” The university hosts elite programs in engineering, the sciences, medicine, and other disciplines—but its secret weapon consists of six independent creative and performing arts schools, which together represent an unusual concentration of excellence in the arts and humanities. In another example of USC’s commitment to an integrated approach to pursuing excellence, it has positioned its arts schools to supply the larger academic community with an infusion of creative energy. And this will increasingly nurture breakthroughs in the sciences and social sciences, technology, and the professions.

In his inaugural address in the fall of 2010, Nikias spoke loftily of how, “while USC imitates no one, I do believe USC has the chance to serve as an intellectual engine in this century, in much the way Oxford University emerged earlier as the intellectual engine of the British Empire and commonwealth nations.”

If those words struck some observers as overly ambitious on that fall morning, they seem prescient today, based on the progress charted over the past five years. Bear in mind, however, that Nikias qualified his words with the phrase, “USC imitates no one.” The Trojan Family represents a particular community of people with a distinct set of values. They seek not to replicate the successes of others, but to achieve their own successes, by staying faithful to their identity and to their forward-looking heritage.

The miraculous academic progress at USC in recent years required a willingness among its constituencies to step forward into the fog of uncertainty that characterizes our times, guided by some core principles and old-fashioned determination.

And so USC may be on course to completing a dramatic metamorphosis as an iconic 21st century global university—a development that would have seemed unimaginable to those who watched a tiny, local college on the Western frontier open its doors 135 years ago.

In that sense, USC’s story is indeed a quintessentially American story; and its path increasingly seems likely to shape the story of America’s emerging future in this still-new century.