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USC president seeks global reach



A statue of the school mascot, the Trojan, stands on the campus of the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles, Calif. *Photo by David McNew/Getty Images*

By Nick Anderson

Many Americans, perhaps most, know the University of Southern California as the home of the Trojans. The branding power of college football, for certain schools, is hard to overestimate.

But USC's president, C. L. Max Nikias, noted in a recent lunch with *The Washington Post* that the Los Angeles school stands out for numerous reasons completely unconnected to sports.

Nikias, like his school, thinks big.

USC is the largest private university on the Pacific Coast, with 41,368 students as of fall 2013. It ranks fourth in the nation among private, nonprofit universities in enrollment, behind Liberty University (77,338), Western Governors University (46,733) and New York University (44,599).

From 2008 to 2013, USC's enrollment rose 23 percent. It has more than twice as

many students as Stanford University, the elite private school in Northern California.

USC is a magnet for foreigners, with 10,932 international students enrolled in the 2013-2014 school year, according to the Institute of International Education. That ranked it second in the country, behind NYU (11,164) and ahead of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (10,843).

Nikias, 62, a Greek Cypriot and naturalized U.S. citizen, has made globalization a priority. He served as USC's dean of engineering from 2001 to 2005 and then its provost before becoming university president in August 2010. He said USC has paid close attention to international recruiting for years.

After the terrorist attacks of September 2001, he said, many higher education leaders worried about a drop in international students. That's when USC accelerated

its outreach. In 2001-2002, USC hosted 5,950 international students. The total has nearly doubled since.

"I became very proactive," he said. Nikias ramped up recruiting in India and Pacific Rim nations. "Because we were so proactive, we got ahead of everybody." In recent years, USC has opened offices in numerous countries. There are now eight: Hong Kong and Taipei (both opened in 1998); Mexico City (2005); Shanghai (2009); Mumbai (2010); Seoul (2010); Beijing (2012) and Sao Paulo (2013).

But USC does not have international campuses. Nikias said that policy is meant to preserve standards.

"You cannot afford to dilute the quality of a USC degree," he said, "by setting up campuses abroad."

He takes the same contrarian view of

massive open online courses, or MOOCs, a free education movement that is taking root at many prominent colleges and universities. USC doesn't do MOOCs. It offers plenty of online education, especially at the graduate level, but for a price.

"That's our business model," he said. Nikias said giving away what the university provides would be counterproductive. "We're the ones who admit students, and we're the ones who are going to issue degrees," he said. "At the end of the day, I feel that without our academic brand, we're nothing. Literally nothing."

In 2011, Nikias announced a \$6 billion fundraising campaign for USC that is due to end in 2018. That's a very large target. At the time, it was said to be the largest ever for a university. For perspective, Harvard University recently announced it is on a quest for \$6.5 billion. USC officials in January said they are two thirds of the way toward their goal, with \$4 billion raised. Only a few schools have ever raised that much in a campaign.

With fund-raising, setting goals is crucial. Nikias recalled that \$4.5 billion would have been a "comfortable target." But the question, he said, was whether to go for \$5 billion or \$6 billion. Nikias wanted the university to stretch. "We do stick our necks out," he said.

Among the uses of the money: Academic research, faculty expansion, student financial aid and campus development.

Being the university's chief ambassador, Nikias said, is a 24/7 job. "But don't get me wrong. I love it. You can't fake it."

For any university president, one of the signs of success is when a top lieutenant



University of Southern California President C. L. Max Nikias. Photo by Phil Channing

lands a major job. Elizabeth Garrett, provost at USC under Nikias, was recently named president of Cornell University.

Federal data show that 23 percent of USC undergraduates have enough financial need to qualify for federal Pell grants. That's not as high as the share at its cross-town public rival, the University of California at Los Angeles. The rate at UCLA is 36 percent. But USC serves a much larger share of students in need than many prestigious private schools and is a significant destination for community college transfers.

It also provides financial awards to many affluent students. About 20 percent of its full-time freshmen have no need but receive annual discounts of about \$20,000, on average. The full price of tuition, fees, room and board this year is more than \$60,000. As long as the university ensures that it is accessible to students in need,

Nikias said, "then personally I don't see anything wrong with merit-based aid."

In the latest *U.S. News and World Report* analysis, USC ranked 25th among national universities, tied with Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania. That places it just ahead of Tufts University in Massachusetts and Wake Forest University in North Carolina, and just behind UCLA and the University of Virginia.

"Sure, we pay attention to the rankings," Nikias said, "because everyone looks at them." But he said they don't provide a full picture of the institution, especially its strength in the arts. USC, which first opened in 1880, has arts schools in music, cinematic arts, dramatic arts, architecture, art and design. It is forming a new school in dance that Nikias wants to compete with the Julliard School in New York.

As for athletics, Nikias took pains to clean house in 2010 when he became president. The NCAA that year had imposed tough sanctions on USC for various rules violations, citing a "lack of institutional control," according to a *Los Angeles Times* account. [USC's head coach for a nearly a decade, Pete Carroll — who denied wrongdoing at USC — left in 2010 to coach the NFL's Seattle Seahawks, a team he led to a Super Bowl victory after the 2013 season and a Super Bowl loss on Sunday.]

The university last year emerged from probation, under the leadership of an athletic director, Pat Haden, whom Nikias appointed. Haden was a star Trojan quarterback. The president himself keeps a close eye on athletics.

"The AD reports to me personally," Nikias said. "I don't have any other layers."