The USC football team will probably lose to UCLA this weekend. But off the field, the University of Southern California is on a winning streak that is one of the most important stories in our state.

USC’s rapid growth over the past generation from regional school to global powerhouse has turned it into one of California’s most influential institutions. In the process, USC has demonstrated what might be possible for California’s leading public universities, if they weren’t subject to the whims of our dysfunctional state government.

USC has capitalized on its flexibility as a private school to raise the school’s endowment and profile. Public universities are hamstrung in fundraising by the perception that they are state funded (even though state money is a small fraction of their revenue) and by wariness about donations from politically unpopular sources.

USC, without a meddling minority investor like state government, can raise money as relentlessly as it wants. At nearly $5 billion, its endowment is one of the country’s fastest-growing.

By contrast, USC’s leaders have had a freer hand to pursue a long-term strategy of better connecting the university to all elements of life in Southern California. USC has secured effective control of the L.A. Coliseum and is developing the $650 million USC Village mixed-use project. USC has gobbled up institutions elsewhere in L.A. (including a Glendale hospital and a Pasadena museum) and built a stronger presence in San Diego.

More than a Trojan horse, USC is viewed across the region as a white knight. Struggling institutions fantasize of being rescued by a USC takeover. In my view, the Los Angeles Times could best secure long-term viability as an arm of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

Even as it grows locally, USC has unabashedly global ambitions. It leads the nation in attracting foreign students, a fact it rightly celebrates.

Meanwhile, the University of California system is bitterly criticized for adding foreign students, even though their higher tuition subsidizes lower in-state tuition for Californians.

While California’s public universities remain traditional in scholarship to preserve their academic prestige, USC has few such hang-ups. Its strategic plan emphasizes “entrepreneurial activities through flexible structures that allow faculty to move swiftly into new areas” and it has proudly opened institutes led by the likes of Dr. Dre and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

USC has stepped on toes in pursuit of growth. The university’s recent effort to steal a major Alzheimer’s research project from UC San Diego was so brazen that the University of California sued. And as it catapults itself from mediocrity into the nation’s top tier of private institutions of higher learning, USC will face the same questions now confronting the Stanfords of the world – about whether its success contributes to widening inequality, and whether it should do more for those left behind by poor high schools and circumstances.

I’ll be wearing a UCLA T-shirt this weekend for reasons personal (I grew up going to Bruin games) and professional (UCLA is a vital partner of Zócalo Public Square, which produces this column). But I also root for USC as a powerful example for California.

Yes, our public universities have remained excellent despite cuts and constraints. But just imagine how much more they could do if the state stopped its meddling and allowed our universities to fight on with all the flexibility the Trojans enjoy.