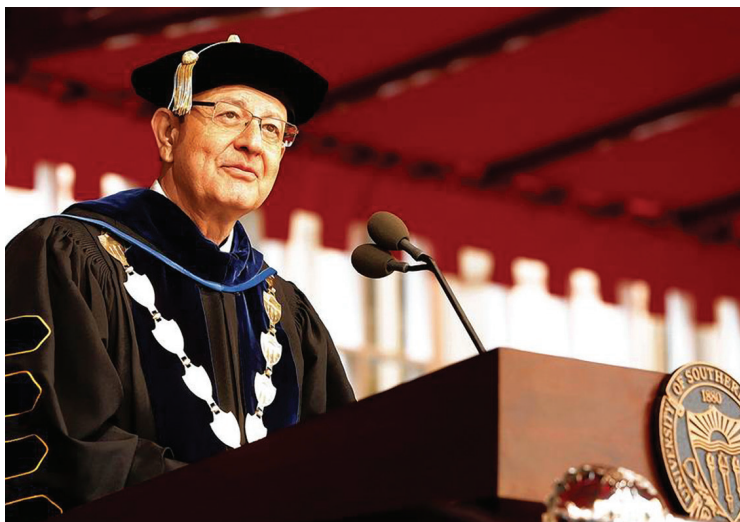


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How USC Became a Leader in Recruiting Minorities

President C. L. Max Nikias says universities can't just wait and see who applies



'Partner with K-to-12 schools. This is where you can make a difference.'
C. L. Max Nikias, President, University of Southern California.

By Douglas Belkin

Wealthy private colleges and universities are under the microscope for failing to open their doors to more smart students from poor families.

The criticism is rooted in a simple fact: Poor students remain stunningly rare at America's elite universities. One exception is the **University of Southern California**, where one in four students is eligible for a Pell grant, the federal aid program for low-income college students.

Leading USC's efforts is C.L. Max Nikias, who took over as president of the university in 2010. Once widely derided as the University of Spoiled Children, USC now is a leader among the nation's top private research schools in enrolling children from poor families and minorities. The Wall Street Journal asked Mr. Nikias about his strategies, his critics and his stumbles. Following are edited excerpts of the discussion.

Taking the initiative

WSJ: *You have nearly doubled the number of students from poor families in a very short time. How did you do it?*

Mr. Nikias: We decided that we wanted to be very, very

proactive in terms of recruiting students who are first generation [college students].

We visit 2,000 high schools around the country and we promote USC programs. We do it twice a year, in the fall and spring. We're not sitting back and whoever applies to USC, then we screen and decide.

The second thing that we do is that we pay attention to the pipeline, because American higher education will only address the so-called diversity issue successfully if we pay attention to the pipeline.

There are three million kids every year who graduate from high school in the United States, and no more than 250,000 of them have the overall academic preparation to be considered by any of the top 50 universities in the country. And out of that 250,000, it's only 11,000 African-Americans and 24,000 Latinos. So it becomes extremely important to build up the pipeline and prepare these kids for college.

WSJ: *I'm going to guess your opinion of the public school system in the U.S. is not very high.*

Mr. Nikias: Look at the L.A. school system, their graduation rate is less than 50%. Look at most of the other public school systems around the country. To me that is a real crisis.

WSJ: *What responsibility do you have to children in poorly performing public school systems?*

Mr. Nikias: This is the raw material that comes to my college, and therefore I have to make sure the raw material is very well prepared entering our university.

We have a number of programs here at USC where we work with K-to-12 schools to prepare these kids for college.

There are close to 1,100 kids enrolled in this program in the 6th to 12th grades. They come to campus every Saturday for five hours and they get special tutoring in classes. We require that adults from their household also participate. They take classes about what it takes to prepare your child to go to college. We have two charter schools we have adopted for the same reason, and our school of education is essentially running those charter schools.

In other words, the reason you're seeing 22% of our undergraduates are underrepresented minorities and almost 25% are Pell grant recipients is because of all this effort. It's not one thing that does it.

WSJ: *So what is your advice to your peer institutions?*

Mr. Nikias: Pay attention to the pipeline. Partner with K-to-12 schools. This is where you can make a difference. Every year our neighborhood academic initiative graduates between 75 and 90 kids, and one-third qualify to go to USC. We offer them a full ride for four years.

WSJ: *The flip side of providing these opportunities for students from poor families is that your tuition is one of the highest in the nation for wealthy families.*

Mr. Nikias: We are an expensive university, that's a given. We have the largest financial-aid pool in the country. We give \$300 million per year for aid. If you look at the graduating students, 70% of them receive some form of financial aid and 30% of our students pay the full tuition.

The fairness issue

WSJ: *You are asking wealthy families and upper middle-class families who saved for years to pay full tuition to subsidize students from poor families. Is that fair?*

Mr. Nikias: What we create here is an environment that is a microcosm of what the real world is all about. If I were to not offer any financial aid, the effective tuition is \$31,000.

But then the university will become the University of Spoiled Children. We will no longer be an environment that provides a great educational experience for everyone who is here, that they get to know each other from different walks of life.

WSJ: *What do you make of this debate in Congress to force wealthy schools to spend more of their endowment earnings on financial aid?*

Mr. Nikias: It's still at the very early stages. It doesn't mean it won't get any legs in the future.

When we talk about the endowment—and I stressed this in my meetings with members of Congress—the endowment is not one fund, it's a pool of thousands of funds. All of us [private college presidents] have been good stewards to make sure that we religiously protect the wishes of the donor. If a donor gives us money for something, it may be for cancer research, for example, I can't take the money and put it into a student scholarship, because that was not the intent.

Open Doors

Among private schools in U.S. News and World Report's top 50 national universities, these have the highest percentage of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants based on 2013-2014 data

SCHOOL	RANK	PCT.
Univ. of Southern California	23	23%
New York University	32	21
Columbia	4	21
Emory	21	21
Brandeis	34	20
Case Western Reserve	37	19
MIT	7	18
Univ. of Rochester	33	18
Rice	18	17
Rensselaer Polytechnic	41	17
Brown	14	16
Cornell	15	16
Stanford	4	16
Tulane	41	15
Lehigh	47	15

Source: U.S. Department of Education (Pell Grant percentages); U.S. News and World Report (rankings)

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