USC delegation visits Taiwan

More than 6,000 USC alumni currently live and work in Taiwan

The China Post

Top US school inks new partnership with Taiwan

TAIPEI, Taiwan -- “As of probably 10 years, the largest international alumni population of USC were Taiwanese. There are very strong ties,” University of Southern California (USC) President C. L. Max Nikias said as he sat down with The China Post in an exclusive interview in Taipei.

His delegation is currently in Taiwan for a weeklong visit.

One of the world’s leading private research universities, USC has ventured out to other side of the Pacific Rim serves for a twofold purpose: strengthening existing links with Taiwanese institutions and exploring new opportunities.

“As president, I see Taiwan as a strategic priority for our international outreach for the university, given the very strong ties that exist between USC and Taiwan in the past 60 to 65 years,” Nikias told The China Post.

“I feel that we don’t want to lose that very strong connection,” he said.

Over 440 students from Taiwan are currently enrolled at USC, making Taiwanese students the university’s fourth-largest source of international students.

One may say that’s remarkable given Taiwan’s size, though Nikias points out the university has “always been a magnet for excellent students.”

New Partnership with MOE

To strengthen that connection, the USC delegation visited the Ministry of Education (MOE) on Monday with plans to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU).

“We not only want to reinforce the partnership we have in place for Ph.D. students to come and study at USC, but we’re also going to sign a new MOU with the Education Ministry” Nikias said.

The MOU will open up the door for a program allowing professors from Taiwanese universities to visit USC for short-term training or other purposes.

“We’re very excited for a program like that,” Nikias said.

While there are already similar partnerships with the school of dentistry, pharmacy school of social work, programs for the elderly, for USC, the new program is a means to expand into different working opportunities.

“That’s why we’re looking for many different ways to expand relations with institutions in Taiwan.”

Over 40 percent of USC’s Taiwanese alumni received degrees in electrical engineering.

Currently, a popular choice for undergraduates at USC is business administration, while it’s computer science
for master's students.

**Entrepreneurial and Diverse**

When asked about the features that makes USC compelling for students, Nikias leaned over, as if to impart a secret. Lowering his voice and emphasizing each word, he said it is the “culture and the values of the university.”

“We are a very entrepreneurial culture … so that’s why we attract very entrepreneurial students and faculty. We attract faculty who want to build — they want to create programs. We have an environment that gives them the resources … They don’t need to run into bureaucracy or problems.”

He also stressed that interdisciplinary curricula remain a strong point for students at USC. “We feel very strongly that our students should graduate with not only the depth in their discipline but also breadth.”

Not many universities do that, he said. Also, the school encourages students to study abroad for a semester. “They can go to a foreign university for one semester and whatever courses they take there goes into their credits back here too.”

On USC’s campus, the student body hails from all 50 U.S. states and 120 different nations. “So, in other words, we have … more than 90 different religious views in the world being represented in our student body today,” Nikias said.

Diversity reflected not only in the curriculum but also in the student body is the result of USC’s goal to equip students with the ability to work with people of all cultures upon graduation. “We graduate citizens of the world,” Nikias said.

**‘Gifts of any size matter’**

Maintaining academic excellence, especially for a private research university like USC, is critical for continuing to attract top students and faculty from not only the U.S. but around the world.

That means fundraising is integral to the work of upholding and pushing the boundaries of quality higher education at the institution.

Under Nikias and his predecessor, Steven Sample, USC has moved up in national academic rankings. In a 2016 Wall Street Journal survey, the university ranked No. 15 out of more than 1,000 U.S. colleges and universities.

Six years ago, Nikias announced a campaign to raise US$6 billion, a target regarded as one of the most ambitious fundraising goals in U.S. academia.

Some considered it audacious, Nikias recalled.

But, they’re now reaching that goal. “I confess it wasn’t in our wildest dreams that six and a half years later, we would be reaching the US$6 billion goal. We are 18 months ahead of schedule.”

About 64 percent of the money raised came from non-alumni of the university, Nikias says.

There are about 280,000 gifts of US$1,000 or less. In total, USC received 322,000 gifts (including the larger ones). “That tells you every gift of any size really counts.”

Due to its success, the fund-raiser will be extended for another five years to 2021.

The money will go into student scholarships, endowing chairs for professors and research programs and funding other academic priorities for the school, he said.

“Medical sciences and patient care has been top priorities for us as a research university,” Nikias said, adding that society was at the dawn of a new industrial revolution — the biotech revolution.

“Therefore, as a research university, we are making serious investments because we want to be a key player in the biotech revolution,” he said, pointing out that the revolution can promise not only to extend quality of life, but also improve quality of it.

**Modern Tuscan Village**

Money from fundraising campaigns will also go toward building and improving infrastructure such as USC Village, which is set to open this fall.

The village is 1.3 million square feet of space, encompassing eight residential colleges and potential housing capacity for 2,600 undergraduate students.

Boasting Collegiate Gothic architectural-styled buildings, red bricks and an Italian renaissance look, it’s a Tuscan village redefined for the 21st century, Nikias said.

“The looks of the USC Village, as what I like to say, give us 1,000 years of history that we don’t have as an university,” Nikias said.

“It will become a beautiful welcoming residential environment for our students. It’s going to have coffee shops, restaurants, Trader Joe’s … it’ll have a gym.”

USC alumni, when shown videos and photos of the design, have joked that they now want to go back to school, he said.

**Intellectual and Cultural Engine**

Nikias said he was excited for the years to come, especially with the extension of the fundraising campaign.

But the USC president said there was one thing that kept him up at night: “I do not want us to lose that momentum that we have.”

“We honestly want USC to become the intellectual and cultural engine of the Pacific Rim nations and of course the United States… and we have many things going for us to have that impact in the 21st century.”

Over the last five years, USC has had more international students than any other university. Based on such a diverse student body, Nikias says he believes the school can indeed achieve such an impact.
1. The USC delegation visited National Taiwan University.

2. USC trustee Daniel Tsai, vice chairman of Fubon Financial and chairman of Taiwan Mobile

3. USC President C. L. Max Nikias led a delegation of trustees, deans, faculty, and senior leadership to Taiwan to strengthen academic partnerships.

4. National Taiwan University President Yang Pan-chyr and President Nikias signed a memorandum of understanding for continued strategic cooperation.

5. (top, from left) Chairman of the USC Board of Trustees John Mork; Taiwan Political Deputy Minister Tsai Ching-Hwa; (bottom, from left) Dr. C.J. Liu, education counselor with the Taiwan Ministry of Education and President Nikias. At the Ministry of Education, Drs. Liu and Nikias signed a memorandum of understanding to bring recent Taiwanese Ph.D. grantees to USC as postdoctoral fellows. This new deal builds on a longstanding history of collaboration between USC and the Ministry of Education.

6. President Nikias and George Chen, president of the USC Taiwan Alumni Club

7. President and Mrs. Nikias, pictured with USC parents George Chen and his wife, Shari

8. President Nikias and Vice President of the Republic of China (Taiwan), Chen Chien-jen

9. (from left) USC trustee Daniel Tsai and his wife, Irene; President Nikias and First Lady Niki C. Nikias; Taipei Mayor Eric Chu and his wife, Kao Wanching at a welcome dinner hosted by the Tsais.

10. President Nikias presented trustee Daniel Tsai and his wife, Irene, who is a USC alumna, with a statue of USC founder Judge Robert Maclay Widney.

11. More than 400 USC alumni attended a reception during the trip. Fight On from Taipei!

Photos 1, 3, 4, 5, 7-10 by Eric Abelev; photos 2, 6, 11 by Dun-Huang Wang
The China Post published two stories during the USC delegation's time in Taiwan. The first covered the mutually beneficial partnerships between USC and Taiwanese institutions, and the second focused on President Nikias's undergraduate course at USC, “The Culture of Athenian Democracy.”