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### Author

Jackson, Michael L.

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**UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN A RESEARCH UNIVERSITY:  
Scaling High Impact Practices at USC**

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**Michael L. Jackson\***  
University of Southern California

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**ABSTRACT**

The University of Southern California (USC) transformed its undergraduate education program by making it a top priority in its strategic plans for the last two decades. The undergraduate experience was thoroughly studied and findings were used to determine what needed to be changed to improve the educational experience for students in and outside of the classroom. The institution has spent over \$1.5B to hire new faculty to teach undergraduates, construct new residential colleges and renovate older ones (all led by tenured faculty), and build a new health center, campus center, and spaces in the USC College and professional schools dedicated to undergraduate academic programs, support services, and co-curricular programs. The key to the transformation was leadership provided by its late President Steven B. Sample and the university leaders he recruited to take on this big challenge. The team was focused and empowered to make administrative and academic changes, in concert with deans and faculty leaders, and given resources to turn thoughts, dreams and hopes into reality. The results are clear and demonstrate that institutions can improve undergraduate education by making it a high priority, allocating resources to recruit and hire outstanding faculty, and expand and improve programs, activities and facilities that directly serve undergraduates.

**Keywords:** Undergraduate Education, Best Practices, Leadership, University of Southern California

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the University of Southern California (USC) transformed its undergraduate education programs of uneven quality and poor reputation in and outside the classroom to one of outstanding quality and strong reputation through the scaling of high impact practices. The following explores the sires of policy changes between 1995 and 2016 and details the steps USC took to improve undergraduate education. The change was dramatic and astounding. I do not believe another institution of higher education, in recent history, has made such a remarkable turnaround in such a short period of time.

**BACKGROUND**

In 1995, I was recruited from Stanford University, where I was dean of students and had served as assistant to the provost for a number of years, to USC by President Steven B. Sample and Provost Lloyd Armstrong to become vice president for student affairs. They were assembling a new team of leaders to transform the university from an institution better known for graduate education and sports programs than one that was also celebrated for outstanding undergraduate education.

At the time USC was considered a safety school for high caliber high school students seeking admission to top tier private and public research universities. For example, USC's reputation for quality undergraduate education lagged far behind Stanford University, University of California at Berkeley (Cal) and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and California Institute of Technology.

\*Michael L. Jackson, Ed.D. served as Vice President for Student Affairs and Professor of Higher Education at the University of Southern California (USC) from 1995-2013. He served on 15 WASC accreditation teams and was as Commissioner for six years. He is also as past President of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).

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\* Michael L. Jackson has been vice president for Student Affairs and professor of higher education in the USC Rossier School of Education for the past 16 years at the University of Southern California (USC). Prior to his arrival at USC, he served as Dean of Students at Stanford University.

USC was established in 1880 in Los Angeles. It is comprised of a college of letters, arts and sciences and professional schools, including business, engineering, education, architecture, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, social work, cinematic arts, fine arts, dance, music, gerontology, accounting, education, and public policy. Today, the university enrolls approximately 43,000 students; 19,000 undergraduates and 24,000 graduate students from all 50 states and 130 countries. Each year USC enrolls about 3250 freshman and 1500 transfer students. In 2016, USC enrolled 211 national merit scholars. 14% of the student body was first generation students and over \$243M in financial aid was distributed to undergraduates, arguably the largest amount in the nation for private universities.

The university has 4028 faculty members, is a member of the prestigious, Association of American Universities (AAU), the top research universities in the United States, and had \$700M in federal research expenditures in 2016.

The following statistics demonstrate the progress USC made as an institution to improve the undergraduate experience between 1995 and 2016.

- 1995 Six-Year Graduation Rate: 62.9%
- 2015 Six-Year Graduation Rate: 92%
- 1995 SAT: 1050
- 2015 SAT: 1380
- 1995 Ranking: 56 (US N&W Report)
- 2016: 23 (US N&W Report)
- 1995 Acceptance Rate: 60%
- 2016 Acceptance Rate: 18%

### **LEADERSHIP MADE THE DIFFERENCE**

President Steven B. Sample was the visionary and determined driving force behind the great strides to improve undergraduate education at USC. He made undergraduate education the number one priority of the university-wide strategic plan that was approved by the Board of Trustees in 1993. He hired Lloyd Armstrong, dean of the school of arts and sciences at Johns Hopkins University, to be his provost and recruited talented and experienced deans of schools and other administrative leaders that shared his passion for improving undergraduate education.

Dr. Sample was relentless and developed processes and programs that encouraged all institutional constituencies (faculty, staff, alumni, donors, student, parents, community leaders) to commit to this cause. The results provide clear evidence of what was accomplished under his leadership. The torch was passed to his successor, Dr. Max Nikias, who has continued USC's commitment to strengthening undergraduate education.

### **HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES: THE SCALING BEGINS**

In 1993 the university implemented its first institution-wide strategic plan to improve the university. The plan had four pillars:

- Undergraduate Education
- Internationalization
- Interdisciplinary Studies and Research
- Los Angeles as a Living and Learning Laboratory

The trustees, president, provost, deans of schools, department chairs, faculty, staff, and students were tasked to work together to foster a more academically oriented undergraduate culture. It was made clear that schools, academic programs, and administrative offices would be evaluated and provided resources based on their contributions to the four pillars, particularly undergraduate education.

The fact that undergraduate education was the number one pillar (priority) signaled to the broader community that the university was committed to investing in the experience of undergraduates like it had done to become a top research university, which led to its election to the AAU. It also meant that student services and campus life had to be improved to support this new and evolving undergraduate culture.

### **LARGE SCALE INITIATIVES**

Under the auspices of the provost, General education (GE) was studied by a university committee. It was decided that GE courses, which were taught in all schools, would only be taught in the college of letters, arts, and sciences and named the USC Core. To improve and maintain the quality of GE courses, it was also decided that only tenure track faculty would teach them.

The college hired dozens new tenured and tenure track faculty in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences to teach, guide, and mentor undergraduates.

Professional schools that previously taught GE courses, and received income based on the number of units taught, under the revenue center management system, were kept whole for three years to make up for reduced income. They were encouraged to develop minors to attract undergraduate students to make up for the lost income. Over 120 minors were developed in the schools and each year 30 to 40 percent of undergraduates enrolled in these minors. Students were also encouraged to explore double majors and majors and minors. Undergraduate research was expanded and service-learning opportunities, associated with courses, were created in the college and professional schools.

A GE speaker series was created to provide opportunities for all students in the USC Core to hear about and discuss common issues and themes related to what they were learning in their GE classes. In addition, a program named visions and voices was created and brought to campus authors of books, plays, movie screen plays, musical, dance and spoken word performing artists, discussions with leading intellectuals, community leaders, business people.

A TEDx program, modeled after the popular Ted Talks, was also established. It brought exciting thinkers and personalities to campus who shared their personal histories and ideas about the humanities, science, social science, technology, human relations, religion, and other topics that encouraged students to think about their place in the world, how others took actions to overcome great obstacles in their lives, made discoveries, and developed innovations that led to improvement in the human condition.

The role of vice provost for undergraduate programs was established to provide leadership and better coordinate university-wide programs to help the college and professional schools work more closely together, share expertise, and reduce silo behavior and competition.

The president and provost also modified the way deans of the schools were evaluated. A portion of their merit pay and at-risk performance bonuses were based on how much they contributed to improved retention and graduation rates. For example, if a student who is admitted to the school of engineering wanted to transfer to the college or school of business, the deans and their staff needed to make sure that the students were “handed off” to the new school successfully so they could continue to progress and graduate on time.

A graduation and retention committee of key faculty leaders and senior administrators was created and empowered to act and make decisions to improve the bureaucracy, eliminate redundancy, and improve services for students.

The committee also reviewed all “gateway” courses for freshman (e.g., chemistry, biology, mathematics) to see why students were struggling, not achieving, and thereby prevented from progressing to higher-level courses. For example, a review of introductory biology determined that the classes were too large. Class sizes were reduced; students became less intimidated, got more attention from professors and teaching assistants, and were exposed to better teaching techniques.

The vice provost for undergraduate programs led an effort to overhaul undergraduate advising in the college and all schools, that taught undergraduates. The new system, requires advisors to log notes about conversations with students so that accurate records were maintained and advisors from different academic units could counsel students about their academic programs with a sound understanding of prior conversations and decisions made about majors, minors, internships, careers, graduate school and related matters.

An early warning system was also created to identify students who were struggling academically in the first few weeks of the semester to get them the help they needed to improve. At the end of each semester every student on academic probation was required to meet with a counselor to develop an improvement plan. In some cases, parents were also involved in these efforts.

The provost, at the behest of the president, developed competitive post baccalaureate scholars programs with \$10,000 prizes for graduate study and diploma recognition; renaissance scholars (students who enrolled in “widely separated academic programs like English and physics, or history and engineering); discovery scholars (students deeply engaged in research) and global scholars (students who participated in multiple international education experiences).

Academic honor societies, which are firmly rooted in the college and the professional schools, were also established in the university's ethnic community centers (Latino, African American, and Asian American) to encourage academic achievement and pride in excelling in one's major and minor. University-wide honor societies like Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, and Golden Key

were also given greater prominence in campus publications and ceremonies attended by students, parents, faculty and administrative leaders.

### **FROM A COMMUTER CAMPUS TO A RESIDENTIAL UNIVERSITY**

While the university was improving the academic experience for undergraduate students in the classroom it also improved student services by reviewing all key functions that support them outside of the classroom.

Those services included admission, orientation, advising, financial aid, student accounting, registration, housing, recreation, international services, student organizations, student information system, health services, response to individual and collective crises, transportation, and campus safety and security. The result was a more cohesive set of services that required vice presidents, vice provosts, program directors and other staff to work more cooperatively and aggressively to improve services.

Undergraduate admission revamped its recruiting of new students and raised admission standards each year to enroll even stronger classes of first-time freshman and transfer students. College counselors from top private college preparatory schools and public schools were invited to campus to learn about the institution and provide feedback about how USC's undergraduate programs compared with other elite colleges and universities.

Merit-based financial aid was expanded aid to attract top students. The key to this strategy was to enroll the best students who would influence and encourage their peers to give USC a more thorough look and consider emulating their decision to earn their undergraduate degree from the university.

The admission recruitment effort was expanded from visiting 900 high schools to 2,000 to broaden outreach throughout the country and internationally. Prospective students were also afforded opportunities to interview with admission counselors. This resulted in a more diverse national and international student body. In 1995 about 75% of students came from California and most of those students came from Southern California. By 2014 less than 50% of students came from California, 15% were international and the remainder came from other states in America.

\$130M was spent to improve existing housing and all dormitories were changed to residential colleges led by faculty with oversight from the vice provost for undergraduate programs and the vice president for student affairs. Large-scale capital construction projects focused on undergraduates were completed in the schools of engineering business, cinematic arts, communication and journalism, architecture, dance, and the USC College.

Two new residential colleges housing 900 undergraduates, a campus center, a recreation center, and student health center were also constructed. And in fall 2017 the university opened a new undergraduate housing village with five residential colleges and retail shops, eateries and a recreation center for 2700 students at a cost of \$700M. With the addition of a several dozen residential faculty to lead six residential colleges, the role of the traditional resident assistant was broadened which required they meet individually with each resident each semester to make sure they were on track academically and getting the support they needed.

Adjacent to campus local developers also built nearly 7000 new beds for undergraduate and graduate students with amenities mirroring those of on campus housing. Stores, restaurants, and other shops were also added. These facilities provide places and programs for the new undergraduate culture that now embodies the experience for students. There is a real college town feel to the campus that did not exist 15 years ago.

Several other institution-wide initiatives were developed to strengthen undergraduate culture at USC. A university-wide mentoring culture, with support from Mellon Foundation, was established an engaged faculty in all the schools. It included faculty mentoring other faculty, graduate students and undergraduate students. Upper class undergraduates were also encouraged to mentor younger students. Mentoring was also added to the faculty handbook as one of the priorities of annual faculty effort along with teaching, research, and service.

The university imposed strict academic standards on fraternities and sororities and required that, in addition to meeting certain behavior standards, each group had to exceed the all-university grade point average by .02 or face sanctions and possible loss of recognition. The university also required that each member of the Greek community demonstrate involvement in other university-sponsored academic and non-academic student organizations, community service projects and career exploration programs.

Student affairs worked with student leaders to expand the number of student organizations from 320 to nearly 700 so they could explore their interest community service, religion, politics, their majors and minors, and different cultures to name a few categories.

Student affairs expanded its student outcomes research program to annually survey students about their experiences to make sure they were being served well in and out of the classroom and to identify areas in need of improvement (e.g., libraries, technology, recreation, tutoring, housing, dining, diversity programming, student organizations, sense of belonging, etc.)

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

Improving undergraduate education at a university of USC's size, scale and complexity required a number of key attributes:

- A shared vision to become excellent.
- Strong central administration leadership.
- Strong faculty leadership and involvement.
- Accountability in schools and administration.
- Clear and measurable goals.
- Thoughtful research and evaluation.
- Clear and consistent feedback to university community on progress, successes, and on-going challenges.
- Celebration of achievements to mark progress, reinforce goals and foster even greater momentum.
- Creation of a strong culture of care support that meant that students and their families would have to "run from help" because it is so pervasive.
- Empowered staff at all levels to make changes that improved services and engagement of students.
- Make investments once you decide on a direction.
- Engage in continuous planning, experiment, and make adjustments in plans and their execution, as appropriate, without finding fault.
- Remember, you cannot copy your way to SUCCESS
- Long hard process: dedication, commitment, and focus.
- Leverage external factors like accreditation and program review processes to bring forward important issues for examination and improvement.

### **SUMMARY**

This synopsis is by no means exhaustive. Other institution leaders might emphasize other factors in USC's improvement in undergraduate education. I would submit, however, that the sense of team and mutual commitment to improvement was our collective focus. We did not get distracted. That said, we also spent a lot of time making sure the experience of graduate students in the college and the professional schools was also first rate.

There is a lot of texture and subtly behind the high scale practices that were employed that cannot be described in this short synopsis. Sometimes discussions about different ways to approach our tasks delayed decisions. And, there were times in which the lack of immediate financial resources stymied our efforts. But, we did not lose focus, made adjustments, and kept pushing toward our overarching goal of making USC's undergraduate education much better.

As a result of dedicated focus and pride in improving the university from the trustees, senior administration, faculty, students, alumni, donors and friends, the USC of today is well on its way to build on its excellent undergraduate education and experience for students for many years to come.