



MEMORANDUM

To: The USC Community
From: C. L. Max Nikias, President *C. C. Nikias*
Date: August 27, 2012
Subject: Online Education—Hype and Reality

Quietly and without fanfare, the University of Southern California has developed a global online graduate education enterprise that features academic breadth and economic viability—one that expands educational access broadly, while maintaining all-important standards of academic rigor, integrity, and quality. Total **annual revenues** for online USC professional, graduate, and continuing education programs are expected to reach **\$114.5 million** this year—a figure that may be unprecedented for a top American research university.

Today, roughly 4,800 persons are enrolled in accredited USC online master's degree programs that span nine different USC schools. Altogether, USC's online education programs reach 5,500 remote students through graduate-level degree programs and executive and continuing education programs. USC faculty have embraced the potential of online graduate education and have eagerly explored and experimented with models that can engage learners and spark powerful ideas, fresh insights, and new knowledge. As we continue to implement our economically viable online education model that was developed a few years ago, we expect to *double* our enrollment and degree offerings within the next five years.

Given the energetic national debate surrounding the role that online education should play in coming years and decades, I would like to report to you on the priorities and principles embedded in our online education strategy, which has guided us so far and will guide our next steps.

1. USC's focus is on master's and graduate degree programs, along with executive and continuing education. It is at these levels that top research universities have a meaningful role to play in the online education revolution. Within the post-undergraduate phase of *lifelong learning*, technology makes distance irrelevant; students can increase their knowledge while working and living anywhere on the planet, as they learn new skills and move from obsolete industries to new ones.

2. Online programs must preserve academic rigor, integrity, and excellence above all other considerations. Technology must be used to facilitate and enhance, but never dilute, the intellectual encounter between and among faculty and students. The online curriculum must be as rigorous as the conventional curriculum. No two-tier curricular approaches will be utilized, and the online courses will feature the same high caliber of faculty as the classroom versions. All programs must ensure integrity in testing and learning assessment.

3. Online degree programs will use USC's normal admissions standards and charge regular tuition rates. Other universities are increasingly offering online courses for free, with scant concern for whether enrollees ever complete a course. Our goal, by contrast, is to ensure that the educational experience is reserved for only those students with the requisite interest and ability to meet our faculty's high expectations. Every remote student seeking to pursue a degree program must meet the regular admissions criteria of the USC School offering the diploma. In addition, there shall be a careful monitoring of student progress.

4. While partnering with outside education entities, our faculty and schools will retain sole responsibility for ensuring academic quality. External organizations have helped our faculty develop and deliver state-of-the-art, highly interactive learning experiences that have won praise from our remote students. School and university curriculum faculty committees will directly assess the rigor of such programs, as they do with traditional on-campus graduate programs.

5. USC will not offer online degrees at the undergraduate level. This university does not intend to join the growing ranks of institutions that seek to franchise undergraduate education through the Internet or through smaller satellite campuses abroad. The years between 17 and 22, which coincide with the traditional undergraduate experience, represent a corridor of transformation, one in which much of a student's identity and many of her lifelong affiliations are formed. Face-to-face intellectual and creative encounters, inside and outside the classroom, create the greatest impact. This immersive, undergraduate approach is performed best on a broad and comprehensive research university campus such as ours, where knowledge is continually created, tested, and challenged within a dynamic residential community. Technology will enhance, but not replace, the traditional campus undergraduate educational experience.

The University of Southern California pioneered distance education 40 years ago, through TV courses and later Internet broadcasting from the Viterbi School of Engineering. In recent years, USC has moved aggressively, under the leadership of Provost Elizabeth Garrett, to create a broad and multidisciplinary online education approach by providing the right incentives to deans and faculty. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the pivotal leadership of the dean of the Rossier School of Education and the dean of the School of Social Work in developing effective and popular online graduate programs. In the next few years, we expect all 18 USC schools to offer robust online programs in master's, executive, and continuing education.

The Internet's first wave in the 1990s resulted in a dot-com bubble that was inflated by a fixation on the total number of users that a company's website could collect, rather than the *true value* that was created through a viable business model. Online education similarly lends itself to a focus on large numbers—yet there is scant evidence that free online classes or viral lectures produce worthy educational or career outcomes. USC's academic community recognizes, at key inflection points within the development of higher education, that there is a difference between data and wisdom; between mere information and deep insight; and between knowledge disseminated and knowledge absorbed and appreciated. Our goal will always be to produce *true academic value*, for the fullest benefit of our students.

Our online academic community is infusing energy into USC's overall academic community. Faculty and students speak excitedly of the enduring relationships and rigorous intellectual interaction that many of our online programs facilitate. USC Rossier's Master of Arts in Teaching online program, which received the 2011 International Award for Innovative Practices in Higher Education in Washington, D.C., successfully places some 90 percent of its graduates in meaningful employment positions or advanced study. Spouses of military service-members are expressing gratitude for the ability to pursue quality graduate education in social work despite the prospect of frequent relocation. About 200 persons have signed up for the special health insurance program we established last year for remote students. Online and hybrid program students are creating their own USC student organizations, affiliating with on-campus organizations, and even trying out for the Trojan Marching Band. And hundreds of online students and their families now proudly participate in our spring commencement ceremonies. They are becoming, in all respects, full and valued members of the Trojan Family.

The faculty of USC can design and deliver the best remote-learning and hybrid programs, in a way that for-profit organizations acting alone and other universities cannot. This is because of the quality, breadth, and entrepreneurialism of USC's faculty; our academic community's position at the forefront of innovation in digital media and Internet technology, the arts, sciences, culture, and the professions; and our progress in developing an economically viable online educational model that maintains our core academic values, while expanding access on a global scale to meet the growing need for lifelong learning.

Our university offers an ideal environment for experimentation in learning and teaching. We will support our faculty and students as they continue to experiment with new digital technologies and new educational paradigms—within classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and online—to kindle and maintain a lifelong fire of learning within all of our current and future students.