

**The Joint Provost / Academic Senate Committee on Teaching and Academic Programs**  
**Final Report and Recommendations**  
**May 2021**

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**Introduction to the charge**

The Committee on Teaching and Academic Programs was charged this year with assessing the Excellence in Teaching initiative in order to understand how it is being implemented in schools, particularly how the Student Learning Evaluations are being used. The Excellence in Teaching initiative strives to promote teaching excellence, focusing on defining, developing, evaluating and rewarding teaching excellence.

**An institutional leadership opportunity**

USC has become a leader by taking the radical first steps toward demonstrating in tangible ways that *teaching is valued* at top tier research universities. Quality teaching is key to USC's future. Demonstrated excellence in both research and teaching will set us apart from our peers.

The President and the Provost have made clear their commitment to education: teaching and students are often mentioned first, even before research, in speeches and updates to the university community; the 2020-2021 Joint Senate/Provost Retreat focused on the future of education; and serious investments have been made in educational technology to assist faculty with remote teaching during the pandemic and in the expansion of the Center for Excellence in Teaching to help meet the needs of the university.

As with any cultural change, forward momentum must be maintained through continued and unequivocal support and accountability measures. Infusion of new excitement and energy is also needed through bold initiatives that build and expand upon progress already made. The committee believes the university has reached a critical moment in our history that could determine whether a culture of teaching will actually take hold at USC. The time to answer the university's question about teaching excellence is now.

**CTAP recommendations**

Our hope is that the President's and the Provost's commitment will become even more explicit with clearly communicated expectations for all schools to begin or continue to make progress on drafting and implementing their teaching excellence plans. We would argue that even more revolutionary approaches are needed to ensure that teaching excellence is the hallmark of a USC education.

To truly transform teaching, not just here at USC, but at other universities by leading through example, real commitment and investment are required from the President, the Provost, the Deans, and the faculty. Guidance on specific actions required at university and school levels along with a budget targeted to Excellence in Teaching initiatives would be a strong signal of support. The committee would like to assist in creating a new path forward in our teaching culture transformation process. To that end, we provide two overarching recommendations here, which are based in findings from our research (elucidated in the report below):

- **Excellence in Teaching 2.0: Aligning teaching excellence with stated institutional values:** Re-launch the Excellence in Teaching initiative with explicit, strong support from the Provost's office to build on work to date, address existing structural barriers to excellence in teaching, and promote institutional values.
  - Year 1: A joint Senate and Provost task force should review USC's rewards system (awards, merit/promotion/tenure criteria, etc.) and analyze how its current reward system is aligned with our stated values around teaching and research. Research into other top universities' approach to teaching rewards would also be useful. Recommendations for change at the university and school levels should be made to increase the teaching and research behaviors we say we value at USC. The Senate and Provost can take up those recommendations, get input from faculty, and decide what would work.
  - Year 2: A joint Senate and Provost task force should examine current, and recommend new, criteria for the previously recommended rewards system that is better aligned with our values.
  - Year 3: A joint Senate and Provost task force should look at best practices in faculty evaluation processes across schools in terms of alignment with the recommended rewards system, as well as rigor, support, practicality, inclusiveness, etc., and create a set of exemplary models that include these practices that schools may adopt.

The joint Senate and Provost task force should comprise tenure-line and RTPC faculty with sufficient breadth of vision to imagine the structural change required to realize our institutional teaching values and the pragmatism to propose steps for achieving this. Student representation will be important to ensure that their notions of teaching excellence are also considered. The committee's work should be documented and a strategy created for how to promote externally USC's investment in ensuring Excellence in Teaching.

- **Provost's Educational Transformation Fund:** Create a fund to support innovation in teaching across the university.
  - Central funding to support, for example, work to remove barriers to interdisciplinary teaching, novel teaching across schools and disciplines, research into how best to learn from our recent experiences of online teaching to create institutional models for improved teaching moving forward.
  - Seed funding for Deans to incentivize teaching innovation and excellence in their schools and to invest in future resource generation for supporting this work sustainably.

### **Data collection process**

To determine what policies, if any, schools had put on paper to support teaching excellence, as well as if/how faculty were experiencing change on the ground, we reached out separately to each school's cognizant Dean and its faculty (via the Faculty Council). In order to understand the progress made and obstacles encountered within each school, we asked both Deans and faculty to answer a set of questions about how the school was supporting, assessing, and rewarding excellent teaching.

The breadth and depth of replies we received varied significantly, but we were pleased to obtain at least some information—from Deans, Faculty Councils, or both—from 21 (or roughly 90%) of USC's schools (See Appendix 1). Our inquiries also prompted a number of schools to re-engage with Excellence in Teaching Plans that had been stalled in various stages and move forward with completing and submitting them.

### **Cross-cutting findings**

The school leadership and faculty at large all endorsed the Excellence in Teaching initiative, some through the sponsorship of CET faculty fellows and others by providing funding for professional development beyond the school.

The majority of schools that have a completed plan are either establishing a committee to oversee the peer review process and/or incorporating self-reflection practices into their faculty annual review. A number of schools either created or had an appointed leadership position for education (most often in the form of a Vice Dean). Some schools have created a permanent task force or committee (membership of which is recognized as "service") which provides a structure for systematic follow-up of plan implementation and faculty involvement in decision-making, thus allaying potential concerns (e.g., that peer-reviews of teaching could be used punitively). Where plan recommendations are seen as more "optional," they are followed less often.

CET was recognized across many schools as a valuable resource for supporting faculty to improve teaching. The question has been raised as to whether it might be possible to require that course coordinators and others in leadership positions attend CET training or equivalent training offered at the school level. Requests for additional support include the creation of school-level structures to promote excellence in teaching, and increasing sharing of good examples across the university.

Schools have faced a variety of challenges in the development and initial implementation of Excellence in Teaching plans. Time allocation for creation and implementation of the plan is a challenge across most schools; even where schools can provide course releases for faculty to engage in this initiative, the challenge remains of how to cover the teaching. Schools with very small or very large faculties highlighted particular implementation challenges; the former have struggled to assemble the personnel and financial resources to undertake this demanding work, while the latter face the challenge of training, supporting, and assessing huge numbers of faculty. The variability in instructor roles and the types of classes taught have made it difficult to develop and implement a cohesive plan. In some schools, the creation and implementation of plans has

stalled due to turnover of key personnel tasked with advancing this project such as Deans, Vice-Deans, and of course the Provost and President. Student engagement in the Excellence in Teaching initiative has been minimal.

The COVID pandemic has constituted an enormous challenge for schools to provide support for excellence in teaching, including faculty having to spend extensive time converting courses to an online format, low motivation arising from this additional workload accompanied by the freeze in merit raises, and active decisions to 'pause' implementation during the pandemic.

Schools reported a number of good practices that facilitate implementation of these plans. These include devoted resources from the Dean for plan implementation, development of a website to meet the unique needs of their faculty, and the inclusion of self-reflection procedures in the faculty annual review process. In addition, the definition of teaching excellence has been adapted by some schools to their local context to frame their overall teaching activities.

### **Development and dissemination of Excellence in Teaching plans**

Faculty engagement in the development of teaching plans was highly variable. Some schools promoted faculty participation in plan development through the Faculty Council or through individual departments. Some draft plans were reviewed and approved by faculty at large before they were submitted to the Provost, while faculty at other schools reported no knowledge of or engagement with their school's plan, which may have been drafted mostly or entirely by administration.

While most schools have completed and submitted their plans for teaching excellence, others have yet to complete their plans due to a variety of challenges including competing priorities, financial and time constraints, and the pandemic. The dissemination of completed plans varies across schools, with some plans being quite difficult to find and others being shared with faculty through their school website or town halls.

### **Support to faculty for teaching excellence**

Across the university, schools have put in place several different mechanisms to support faculty in the pursuit of excellence in teaching, some of which are highlighted here. Multiple schools supported a weekend retreat where CET trainers provided established methods of pedagogy, including active engagement of learners, while others have encouraged and supported faculty via stipends or course release to attend CET training. The Schools of Dance and Dramatic Arts put financial resources towards faculty participation in CET trainings. Prior to the pandemic, the School of Gerontology offered travel stipends to attend teaching-related symposia and workshops. Still other schools have brought in experts from in- and outside of the school to share their perspectives and experiences. The School of Engineering provides faculty development funds specifically for teaching, while Bovard provides support staff dedicated to assist faculty, professional development funds, a written faculty resources guide, and peer and staff reviews. To support implementation of their plan, the Pharmacy School has created a checklist for self-evaluation which all faculty have been asked to use. The School of Education has created faculty learning modules based on CET modules as well as voluntary faculty learning communities for

peer-sharing of experiences. Within the Public Policy School, the faculty drive the Excellence in Teaching initiative, which is seen as central to its success.

### **Evaluation of teaching excellence**

Evaluation of teaching excellence was discussed in two distinct ways: supportive evaluation designed to help faculty improve teaching practices and performance evaluation to inform decisions around salary and promotion. While the need for performance evaluation is recognized, the faculty underscored the importance of supportive evaluation that is totally separate from this as a mechanism for developing teaching excellence.

To ensure that teaching quality is evaluated equitably, rigorously, and systematically, most USC schools have progressively moved away from using student evaluations as the exclusive method for evaluating teaching. Student feedback at the schools of Engineering and Business, for example, now accounts for no more than 50% of the overall teaching evaluation. Several schools have made changes to the student evaluation questions. The Law School added a question on a student's perceived achievement of the learning outcomes of the course while the School of Gerontology included questions related to the student's engagement in their own learning. Schools who tested USC's learning experience evaluations suggested modifying the questions to provide more information about the course and the instructor's approach and expanding the Likert scale to expand the performance range for faculty. As an example of proactive student engagement, the School of Pharmacy asks some students to review courses on Blackboard and provide feedback prior to implementation.

The annual performance review at most schools now involves, in addition to student evaluations, a peer review of instructor teaching performance including a review of instructor teaching materials. Instructors are also required to submit a teaching reflection statement that includes teaching goals, reflections on student evaluations, and teaching innovations. Not reported by most schools, but recommended by this committee, is the inclusion of factors like investment in teaching development and participation in reviewing peers as components of the teaching portfolio to ensure these vital activities get maximal credit in Annual Performance Review (APR) and tenure/promotion cases.

While faculty at most schools recognize the importance of peer review as an assessment tool, concerns have been raised regarding the time-consuming nature of the process and the potential for bias in peer reviews. The School of Gerontology notes that peer review of teaching can be "fraught with perception issues" and plans to use it only during key milestones of a faculty member's career such as during the 3<sup>rd</sup> year review or promotion. Bovard has created a model in which faculty may gain feedback from peers in a low-stakes, non-threatening manner that resides outside of the central review process. The Libraries have added a voluntary peer observation program in which those being observed are able to request a specific reviewer. The School of Communication and Journalism has worked to make the peer review process more efficient by streamlining processes and offering more administrative support to teaching committees.

The full transition to a peer review model at most schools was delayed by the pandemic. The School of Public Policy put a pause on performance assessments due to the stress experienced

by faculty. Biokinesiology focused on supporting faculty as opposed to evaluating them. The School of Dentistry found that the increased use of Zoom can assist in peer review efforts due to the asynchronous modality.

Some schools have successfully created a centralized process for formative feedback and structured support for faculty while others have decentralized the observation and feedback process by training course directors to help with peer feedback. Those who did not have a centralized approach to teaching evaluation and feedback developed an infrastructure to improve both the evaluation and feedback process. Overall, opportunities for informal faculty support/feedback/development are seen as an important mechanism for discussing challenges, solutions, and best practices.

### **Rewarding teaching excellence**

Acknowledging and rewarding teaching excellence is done variably across USC sites, utilizing both formal and informal mechanisms. Where it is clear that one size will never fit all, it is also clear that guidance on what constitutes a reward and guidance on type, frequency, and accessibility of rewards is needed. It is important that the rewards are not rigid to reflect the diversity in courses, methods, and teaching styles, which are the backbone of the rich student experience that continues to set USC apart.

The vast majority of schools that responded state that teaching excellence is assessed and rewarded through the APR process. This process included peer- and self-assessments, potentially resulting in merit increases and / or promotion opportunities. At the School of Pharmacy, work is ongoing to develop an automated report for faculty who are going up for promotion and who are hoping to have one of their areas of excellence be teaching. Of those who did not list APR explicitly as a reward, this is not to say they did not implement the APR and merit award systems; however, they may see this as part of a contractual assessment rather than explicit reward structure.

Regarding specific rewards, five schools reported giving faculty-driven teaching rewards and three schools offer opportunities for student-led nominations for teaching excellence. Only one school, Dentistry, reported providing both faculty-nominated and student-nominated awards, annually. Many schools' awards are accompanied with a monetary reward, though not all explicitly state this in the reporting exercise. Variation in school size can limit accessibility to teaching rewards; for example, one of the larger schools noted that awards were available in some but not all departments rather than at a school level. It is important to consider (a) whether or not a single prize for a large school would sufficiently motivate or reward the quantity and diversity of teaching that occurs, and (b) whether department-led prizes disincentivize departments within the same school where prizes are not available. Existing structures and cultures across schools are not always set up to incentivize teaching excellence.

In addition to the formal rewards listed, the Schools of Business, Cinema and Gerontology reported informal pathways to highlight and tacitly recognize teaching excellence. These mechanisms include website op-ed pieces highlighting good practice or external accolades.

Additionally, praise in faculty meetings, newsletters, and during one-to-one mentor and line manager meetings were presented as potential reinforcement opportunities. These were mentioned both in Faculty Council and Dean’s reports, which emphasize that rewards do not have to be monetary to be appreciated by teaching faculty, but the wider acknowledgement of a good job can in itself be a reward. The committee could not determine whether this is the opinion of Faculty Councils and Deans only, or whether this accurately reflects the broader faculty perspective.

Several schools mentioned opportunities for training, development, and professional engagement in their description of how they reward teaching excellence. While it is positive that teaching faculty are provided with opportunities to develop, train, and be exposed to techniques and environments outside of their own classrooms, these opportunities should be considered standard components of schools’ support for *developing* excellent teaching rather than as a *reward* for teaching excellence. Support for pedagogical training—including financial support for travel, conference participation, etc.—should not be conflated with a school’s rewards structure. Exceptions to this rule may be sabbaticals provided for intensive pedagogical training or innovative course development, which may be awarded to faculty who have already demonstrated excellence in teaching.

Several Faculty Councils posited that teaching faculty saw student feedback and classroom engagement as reward enough for teaching excellence. Such a stance does not bring parity to the RTPC and tenure-line faculty. Teaching remains the publicly perceived, and financially imperative, function of a university.

### **Conclusions**

Our research has shown that a large number of schools have made great progress toward building the structures and processes needed to foster teaching excellence. However, not all schools have put their full weight behind this effort, with a very small number not engaging at all. Our assessment is that these schools will not meaningfully engage in this effort, and those that have may begin to pull back the costly resources needed for this work, if they don't perceive it as a continued priority for the university. The data we have collected suggest the university is waiting to see whether teaching excellence is part of the new vision for USC.

University-level commitment to promoting excellence in teaching, including facilitating large-scale structural and cultural change around teaching and learning, is critical for building on gains made to date and ensuring institutional leadership in this area.

### **Appendix 1 - Data Overview**

The table below shows the responses received to CTAP’s request for information from Deans and Faculty Councils. Original documents are available at: [Final CTAP Report 2021](#)

School	Dean response	Faculty Council response
Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism	Yes	No
USC School of Accounting	No	No
USC School of Architecture	No	Yes
Roski School of Art & Design	No	Yes
Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy	Yes	Yes <sup>1</sup>
Bovard College	Yes	Yes
USC School of Cinematic Arts	Yes	Yes
Glorya Kaufman School of Dance	Yes	No
Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry	Yes <sup>2</sup>	Yes
Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences	No <sup>3</sup>	No
USC School of Dramatic Arts	Yes	Yes
Rossier School of Education	No <sup>4</sup>	Yes
Viterbi School of Engineering	Yes	No
Davis School of Gerontology	Yes	Yes
Irvine and Young Academy	No	No <sup>5</sup>
Gould School of Law	Yes <sup>6</sup>	Yes
USC Libraries	Yes	Yes

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<sup>1</sup> Biokinesiology & PT only submitted one response; its report was put together by one of the faculty and submitted by the Dean.

<sup>2</sup> The Ostrow Deans and Faculty Council submitted the same document.

<sup>3</sup> While no written response was provided from the Dean’s office in Dornsife, a new draft of the Excellence in Teaching plan was submitted to the Provost’s office as a result of the questions asked by the committee.

<sup>4</sup> The Rossier Dean reviewed the Rossier Faculty Council report and fully endorses its narrative.

<sup>5</sup> CTAP committee member is a member of the Irvine Young Faculty Council and has conferred with additional Faculty Council members on topics relevant to this report; no formal report/survey was obtained or submitted by Irvine and Young Academy, however.

<sup>6</sup> The Gould Deans and Faculty Council submitted the same document.

Marshall School of Business	Yes	No <sup>7</sup>
Keck School of Medicine (Medical Students)	No <sup>8</sup>	Yes
Keck School of Medicine (Health and Biomedical Science)	Yes	N/A <sup>9</sup>
Thornton School of Music	No	No
Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy	Yes	No <sup>10</sup>
USC School of Pharmacy	Yes	Yes <sup>11</sup>
Price School of Public Policy	Yes	Yes
Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work	No	No <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> While no written response was provided by the Marshall Faculty Council (MFC) , the MFC kindly recommended the Marshall Vice-Dean for Teaching and Innovation as the primary reference on the implementation of the Marshall Excellence in Teaching Plan given that the Marshall school administration, rather than the Faculty Council or faculty, was responsible for drafting and implementing the plan.

<sup>8</sup> The Keck Dean did not submit a separate response but reviewed the Faculty Council report and endorsed it completely.

<sup>9</sup> Given the differences between teaching medical students and teaching health and biomedical science students, there is a separate Vice Dean for the latter and separate Excellence in Teaching plans are being created for these different areas of teaching. However, there is only one Faculty Council at Keck. They were consulted during this exercise in the context of the plan for medical students.

<sup>10</sup> The Chan Division submitted one document to the committee, via the Dean’s office; it was unclear to the committee the role the faculty played in shaping the responses.

<sup>11</sup> The Faculty Council did not submit a separate document but they collaborated on the response submitted by the Dean, which can be considered a joint response.

<sup>12</sup> While the Dworak-Peck Dean and Faculty Council did not submit responses to the committee’s questions, the CTAP committee member from Social Work conducted interviews with six faculty members and administrators to craft a narrative about challenges surrounding the implementation of the Excellence in Teaching plan in that school. That document is provided in the folder.