Summary Report on the Provost-Senate Retreat: The Future of Education at USC

April 9 and 10, 2021

This Retreat was organized jointly by the Provost and the Senate Executive Board, aiming to engage senators in the university's strategic reflection on the future of our educational offerings. Looking out beyond the Covid pandemic to the coming decade or two, the retreat aimed to explore how we can better serve our students. A full recording and discussion group notes are available here; here we present the main themes.

Senate President Paul Adler opened the program, making three main points to clarify the goals of the Retreat. First, the context of higher education is changing, probably radically, given demographic changes, pressures created by increasing costs, the evolution of students' and society's needs and expectations, and the emergence of new technologies that enhance the appeal of distance learning. Second, given this changing context, USC will need to make some strategic choices. And third, faculty have a key role in making those strategic choices: this Retreat was designed as an opportunity to open that dialogue.

Provost Chip Zukoski set the stage by identifying some of the big changes we face over the coming 20 years—in the increasingly diverse range of students we serve; in how we teach in an internet era; in new ways of certifying knowledge; in how we pay for education; in the jobs our graduates go on to take; and in the culture war tensions we face. These changes, he pointed out, challenge us to find new ways to articulate the "education" and "training" dimensions of our programs. We need to determine what to keep and what to change, given our enduring commitment to excellence and to the triple mission of education, research, and patient care.

Prof. Jerry Lucido (Rossier) provided context with an overview of the **evolving landscape of higher-education** (presentation here). Overwhelmingly, the growth in college-bound populations will be from groups that have not traditionally enrolled in four-year institutions. Affordability will become ever more critical and student debt an ever bigger burden (absent change in government policy). Employers want graduates with both a liberal arts foundation and professional skills. Elite institutions' policies risk exacerbating rather than mitigating inequality and inequity. At the graduate level, we may see a slowdown in the growth rate of graduate enrollments, as well as increased competition from non-degree on-line programs. And we face waning public trust: a Pew survey in 2020 found that 56% of respondents thought higher education was "going in the wrong direction." In charting USC's path forward, Jerry urged us to see equity and excellence as deeply intertwined: USC can be an elite institution without being elitist.

Andy Stott (Vice Provost for Academic Programs) addressed the **role of liberal education and GEs** in civic engagement, democracy and the needs of future USC students. He explained the emergence of General Education in the longer history of liberal arts education. Andy underscored the tension between the democratic intent of General Education in an otherwise specialized curriculum and the elitism that has haunted the selection of content for the GE (e.g., "great books") and kept it accessible only to a privileged minority. Unlike those of some peer institutions, our GE is deep and rich with many choices but, with the exception of the Honors program, it is buffet-like in its menu and somewhat random in its impact on students. Andy identified several challenges facing a redesign of GE at USC today: in particular, how diversity, wellness, and sustainability should be incorporated, and the impact of any redesign on the distribution of resources across schools, given USC's revenue-centered management.

Breakout groups that followed this presentation were tasked with designing a new GE curriculum for USC that would assure the core competencies set by the WASC accreditation: Critical Thinking, Written Communication, Oral Communication, Information Literacy and Quantitative Reasoning. Although the groups' recommendations varied greatly, some themes recurred: our GE program should (1) sustain and enhance curiosity, critical thinking, healthy emotional connections to others, and awareness about the self in relation to the world; (2) promote active citizenship and social impact through experiential, community-based, practical and service learning; (3) be interdisciplinary in its design, incentivizing and involving faculty from across the schools, weaving artistic expression and knowledge of world cultures across discipline-based courses and culminating in a capstone project; and (4) avoid putting schools in competition for GE revenue.

Michael Berman, Chief Information Officer for the California State University system, presenting for himself and **Kate Miffitt**, Director for Innovation, California State University system, addressed growing interest among students in **micro-credentials and digital badges** (presentation here). Micro-credentials are narrowly focused, competency-based programs that can function either within existing degree programs or as non-credit programs. The programs can be developed by the institution or by third-party vendors. Digital badges are portable records of such credentials, which contain metadata such as the granting institution, the requirements and date of the credential, and a description of the competencies developed. The badges can be "stacked" or combined with credentials from other sources. Digital badges are owned by the participant, who can link them to their social media as evidence to employers of their skills. Entire learning records, such as transcripts, could also be transitioned to this kind of electronic, portable record. Michael and Kate noted that, as micro-credentials are not accredited, their value is largely conferred by the reputation of the credentialing institution.

During the plenary discussion, participants expressed interest in the potential uses of micro-credentials, but some also expressed concern that a push toward micro-credentials could prioritize vocational training at the expense of the university's broader education objectives. The discussion explored, among other aspects, several risks:

- whether micro-credentials and electronic badges would dilute or cannibalize the undergraduate and graduate degree programs, given external providers' lower fees, and relatedly, what impact this would have on faculty salaries and labor;

- whether the trend would lead to an arms race among students, who may feel pressure to collect badges atop their already stressful academic programs, and whether first-generation or URM students may be disadvantaged in this arms race; and

- whether micro-credentials would receive proper levels of curricular oversight.

Michael and Kate closed their presentation by emphasizing the content-neutrality of the micro-credentials and digital badges: these can be designed to reflect the individual institution's values and priorities.

Prof. Julie Posselt (Rossier School of Education) addressed **the evolving PhD** (presentation here). She briefly outlined the history of the PhD, noting that the US model of doctoral programs can be traced back to mid-19th-century Germany, where a distinct form of advanced education for scholars first emerged. In recent decades, PhDs have become increasingly popular as preparation for the professions rather than the professoriate. Julie provided figures for the doctoral programs at USC, where the composition by gender and race showed wide variations. "Underrepresented minorities" are increasingly underrepresented going from Bachelors to Masters to PhDs. Julie noted that while there is

some uniformity across institutions as to what constitutes PhD work, there are also differences between departments and schools, with disciplines having their own cultural norms as to what constitutes a PhD.

How then to open the PhD to greater diversity? Julie identified several opportunities gleaned from her study of some exemplary PhD programs in STEM. First, we can redesign the curriculum so that it aligns better with the professional versus academic career goals and opportunities of students. Second, we should reconsider the implicit biases in the criteria of "merit" in admissions and recruitment. Julie's research on STEM PhD programs shows that faculty tend to recruit students like themselves and privilege "fit" as a selection criterion. Third, she has found that diversity in PhD programs (in particular the success of BIPOC students once admitted) is often greatly enhanced by proactive and program administrators and a department culture of support.

The Provost opened the discussion of **professional development and lifelong learning.** He suggested that in an economy changing so rapidly and in a society struggling go create more opportunity, new programs of this kind might enable USC to better fulfill its mission to support the public good. This leads to several questions that were addressed in breakout group discussions:

- What benefits would accrue to our community and to USC if we were to develop robust continuing education programs?

- How do we engage with employers to help us understand how to prepare students for professional success?

- What professional development opportunities might be needed to enable faculty to stay abreast of transformations taking place around us?

Among the ideas and questions emerging from these discussions were:

- The importance of connecting to our community: we are a part of this community and we need to listen and co-construct future programs with our neighbors.

- Partnering with community colleges may be a strategy for accessing a diverse community of learners, and also learning from how they have been able to develop lifelong learning opportunities.

- We have much to learn from the wide range of professional programs already offered in several of the schools.

- How do we recognized faculty contributions to these programs? Do these become part of regular teaching loads?

Provost Zukoski, Tracy Tambascia (Senate Academic Vice President), and Paul Adler wrapped up the retreat with some concluding thoughts and thanks to the speakers and participants. Adler highlighted a key theme running through the entire program: as we move forward, both demographic changes and strategic choices will require us to pay more attention to our students' needs for professional "know-how" training -- even as our commitment to excellence commands a renewed investment in the complementary "know-why" education. The Senate and the faculty at large, he said, are eager to work with the Provost to chart a path forward that satisfies both aspirations.