

Introduction

The University Research Committee (URC) has focused its recent efforts year on identifying mechanisms to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the USC research culture and community. These values are central to the Culture Journey the university is undertaking, and we see it as our responsibility to identify means by which the research community can embrace them. Beyond aligning the values of the USC research enterprise to the values of the university, embracing DEI in academic research adds value to the research itself and allows researchers to build stronger bridges to the broader society, realizing the potential of our research to benefit the world.

This report is prompted by the urgency and opportunity of the present moment, and it supports and leverages other efforts across the university, including the existing Office of Research strategic plan for diversity and inclusion in research and the recommendations of the President's and Provost's Task Force on Racial Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI).

As a research university, the University of Southern California is dedicated not only to teaching, but to the creation of new knowledge. Per our mission statement:

USC is one of a very small number of premier academic institutions in which research and teaching are inextricably intertwined, and on which the nation depends for a steady stream of new knowledge, art, and technology. Our faculty are not simply teachers of the works of others, but active contributors to what is taught, thought and practiced throughout the world.¹

At the center of this mission are the people who perform research, the communities in which the research is performed, and people who are subjects of the research (both human research subjects, members of communities and cultures that USC researchers study, and communities that are impacted by research findings). It is these stakeholders upon whom our recommendations focus. In this respect, diversity, equity, and inclusion in research must be reflected both in the USC research community and in the subjects and topics of our research.

The members of the USC community who perform research as part of their mission include faculty (both tenure track and RTPC faculty, with research faculty as a unique category that focuses primarily on research), postdoctoral scholars, PhD and Master's students, and undergraduate students. Many of these community members not only perform research, but play key roles as mentors, educators, and supervisors of other researchers. This large, interconnected community represents a major segment of the university; the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion embraced by the research community should mirror those supported by the university overall.

¹ <https://about.usc.edu/policies/mission-statement/>

We defined “diversity” broadly, beginning from concepts of diversity and inclusion as defined by federal funding agencies such as the NSF² and NIH³ and expanding these to include categories of diversity such as sexual orientation and gender identity. Our present recommendations—in light of the historic disproportionate impact of oppressive systems on BIPOC communities—are focused on racial justice. In particular, they are in response to how research with, on, and by people in these communities has been hindered by academic systems.

Further, while hiring and retention initiatives are essential to diversity and representation in the USC research community, we have not made any direct recommendations on hiring policy or strategies. Other efforts at the university, including the President’s and Provost’s Task Force on Racial Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, have focused efforts directly on hiring.⁴ The strategies we propose here align with these recommendations, particularly in terms of how a transparent and accessible tenure/promotion system and a culture of mentorship can aid recruitment and retention.

The URC has identified five strategic initiatives in which significant progress can be made in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in USC research. These are as follows:

1. Leverage resources in a manner that recruits and retains a diverse community of PhD students and postdoctoral fellows.
2. Build a culture of transparency and accountability, including developing uniform best practices for reporting and sharing diversity data, providing resources for comparison to peer institutions, and providing training to understand and respond to data.
3. Scrutinize the role of appointment, promotion, and tenure processes in recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty. As recommended in the REDI report, make the tenure process less opaque and more predictable. Assure that representation is regarded across all classes of faculty and considered in administrative appointments.
4. Recognize the place of Cultural Studies approaches (particularly Black Studies) in the USC research ecosystem. Acknowledge the value of emerging interdisciplinary and intersection scholarship in promotion processes and awards recognition. Formally train USC researchers for cultural competency in research.
5. Build and recognize a culture of mentorship that spans all classes of researchers. Develop a mentorship pipeline that allows first-generation students and postdoctoral scholars to understand how the academy fits in their careers. Collect data on best practices for mentorship towards DEI.

In this report we make a set of recommendations for each of these initiative areas.

Background

² <https://www.nsf.gov/od/odi/reports/StrategicPlan.pdf>

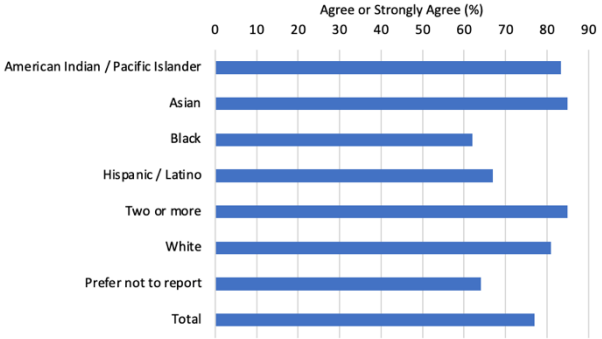
³ <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-20-031.html>

⁴ <https://diversity.usc.edu/files/2021/03/REDI-REPORT-3087.pdf>

In 2018, the Office of Research, together with the URC, developed a strategic plan for diversity and inclusion in research.⁵ The recommendations in the present report support this plan in the context of the present urgency for racial justice and cultural change within the university. The strategic plan sets DEI goals along six facets of the research enterprise: faculty, students and postdocs, staff, research that studies diversity and inclusion, human subjects, and research within diverse communities. We reiterate that these are the key points of contact between research and diversity, and our recommendations are intended to impact all of them.

The strategic plan document also represents a thorough assessment of the recent state of diversity and inclusion in research at USC. This includes the demographic makeup of the community of researchers (PhD students, postdoctoral scholars, research and tenure-track faculty). These data show, for instance, that Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native/Indigenous members of the faculty are underrepresented relative to the general population. The Office of Research strategic plan also highlights the range of scholarship at USC related to diversity and equity or addressing underserved groups and communities.

In 2019, the Office of Research performed a survey with the goal of gaining a clearer understanding of the research culture at USC.⁶ This survey targeted faculty, PhD students, and postdoctoral scholars. Among the questions asked was whether respondents perceived that “faculty in my academic unit support ethnic diversity among colleagues and mentees.” The results, shown to the right, suggest that perception of support for diversity depends on the ethnic background of the respondent, an indication that there is significant room for a culture of diversity to be further fostered in the USC research community.



Our recommendations are driven by a need for equity in the lived experience of USC researchers together with a need for diversity and representation among the USC research stakeholder groups. These considerations of climate and culture also have direct implications for the success of hiring and retention programs: a university with a culture of inclusiveness will inherently find it easier to recruit and retain a diverse research community.

Recommendations

1. *Leverage resources in a manner that recruits and retains a diverse community of PhD students and postdoctoral fellows.*

⁵ <https://research.usc.edu/files/2018/01/DIVERSITY-PLAN.pdf>

⁶ <https://research.usc.edu/files/2019/06/University-of-Southern-California-Research-Culture-Survey-061419-final.pdf>

- a. While increasing the enrollment of undergraduate students from underrepresented groups has been a major priority for the university, there has been no major university-wide initiative to increase the enrollment of these students at the PhD level. The university should allocate funds targeted to support the recruitment of PhD students in concert with the school- and department-level diversity plans that have been developed over the past year. For example, funds should be earmarked to promote USC at disciplinary national meetings and to recruit underrepresented students to PhD programs. Similar promotional efforts should be focused on professional societies and associations that serve underrepresented students.
 - b. To incentivize the faculty role in the recruitment effort, we recommend a university-wide fellowship program to support PhD students from underrepresented groups for the first two years of their graduate study.
 - c. To complement the Provost's Postdoctoral Scholars Program for Faculty Diversity, USC should engage with the inter-institution President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program (PPFP).⁷ More than 100 postdoctoral fellows in the PPFP have transitioned into tenure-track faculty positions.
 - d. The university should increase the competitiveness of hiring packages offered to RTPC research professors, better matching peer institutions.
2. *Build a culture of transparency and accountability, including developing uniform best practices for reporting and sharing diversity data, providing resources for comparison to peer institutions, and providing training to understand and respond to data.*
- a. There should be a university-wide online "diversity dashboard" that transparently presents data on faculty, administrator, and student demographics on the university, school, and department level. Demographic data should represent a broad definition of diversity.
 - b. The university should establish benchmarks and objectives as goals for diversity efforts. These should be based on standardized indices and best practices from peer institutions.
 - c. Expand training against hiring bias to personnel responsible for research staff and postdoctoral fellow hiring and PhD student recruitment.
3. *Scrutinize the role of appointment, promotion, and tenure processes in recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty. As recommended in the REDI report, make the tenure process less opaque and more predictable. Assure that representation is regarded across all classes of faculty and considered in administrative appointments.*
- a. Make transparent standards and expectations in the tenure process including but not limited to the expected number of arms-length letters, the definition of an

⁷ <https://ppfp.ucop.edu/info/>

arms-length letter writer, and the role of a departmental vote and a chair's letter in the tenure decision.

- b. Establish a standard for exit interviews to better identify systematic issues that lead to assistant professors not receiving tenure as well as motives of faculty who choose to leave for other institutions at any point in the tenure process.
4. *Recognize the place of Cultural Studies approaches (particularly Black Studies) in the USC research ecosystem. Acknowledge the value of emerging interdisciplinary and intersection scholarship in promotion processes and awards recognition. Formally train for cultural competency in research.*
 5. *Build and recognize a culture of mentorship that spans all classes of researchers. Develop a mentorship pipeline that allows first-generation students and postdoctoral scholars to understand how the academy fits in their careers. Collect data on best practices for mentorship towards DEI.*
 - a. Formally recognize mentorship as a service component that should be considered in tenure and promotion decisions as well as merit evaluations.
 - b. Empower PhD students and postdoctoral fellows to be mentors by establishing mentorship programs that compensate mentors for their contributions.

This report is presented by the following members of the 2021-2022 University Research Committee:



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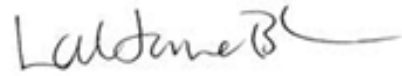
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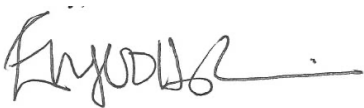
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