

# *Mighty Pillars of a Growing University*

## *The Students of USC*

**F**or generations, the USC student experience has been characterized by a global flavor, close and mutually supportive social connections, and the quintessential college spirit. In recent years, that experience has become sought after to a degree that impressed longtime observers and even the school's proudest alumni.

Word was getting out that USC offered a rare, perhaps unique environment for students in every field to grow, both intellectually and socially. What characterizes that environment? President Nikias said that it involves a “big college’s resources with a small college’s feel.” It includes freewheeling intellectual exchanges between people in the sciences and technology, arts and humanities, and social sciences and professions. And it encompasses an immersive experience in the heart of Los Angeles, one of the most dynamic and forward-looking global cities anywhere. These qualities have made a seat at USC an increasingly prized commodity, first at the undergraduate level and later in the graduate realm.

Over the past few years, the university has made strategic investments in programs and facilities to enhance that rich learning environment, and the competition has increased all the more. In 2010, USC was receiving about 35,000 applications for the 2,700 places in its freshman class. By 2015, that number had passed 53,000—more than any other private research university.

### **Developing the Hybrid University**

USC has focused on building an undergraduate student body that is not only intellectually gifted and motivated to succeed but also uniquely broad in its academic interests. The explicit goal has been to create an intentionally hybrid university, rather than a specialized institution—and to capitalize on the energy that results from the various realms coming into meaningful contact in a manner beyond the reach of peer institutions.





By any measure, the university's student body has become one of the best and brightest in the nation. Unique to USC, however, is the interplay of promising young minds across many fields: in science and technology, the professions, social sciences and humanities, and the performing and creative arts.



As one of the nation’s largest private universities, USC is comparable in scale to many elite public research institutions. Yet for years, its freshman class had boasted higher average SAT scores than any premier public school—a fact that continually surprised many alumni from rival universities.

As time went on, the numbers told an even more compelling story, and by 2015 USC’s 2,700 freshman also compared favorably with their counterparts at renowned private peer institutions. Consider some relative perspective: Caltech’s freshman class featured about 200 students of a rare, almost-perfect academic caliber (as defined by SAT and grade point average); yet USC’s incoming class boasted three times that number—an astounding collection of talent in the sciences and technology. And while the Stanford freshman class of 1,700 students was often viewed as a benchmark of student quality, USC had just as many new undergraduates of that same quality (again, as defined by the shorthand of SAT scores and GPAs).

At the same time, in a sign of its academically diverse nature, USC was also home to another 1,000 students of the highest artistic merit—not as easily measurable by traditional scholarly statistics. In fact, USC had more top students in the creative and performing arts than many of the world’s leading conservatories.

By 2015, a remarkable 6,000 USC students were enrolled in degree programs in the arts, attracted by its six world-class independent schools: the

On Move-In Day, the president and first lady welcome the newest Trojans and their families, at one point posing with students for “selfies,” along with Board of Trustees chair John Mork (top left). Hundreds of USC parents help their children settle in to their new home in the walls of Troy, then bid fond—but somewhat temporary—farewells, as Trojan Family Weekend is only about two months away.



USC Roski School of Art and Design, the USC School of Architecture, the USC School of Cinematic Arts, the USC School of Dramatic Arts, the USC Thornton School of Music, and the newly established USC Kaufman School of Dance. At these institutions, they could receive a best-of-class education in their chosen specialty while also enjoying the intellectual, cultural, and social benefits of a great research university.

### **The USC Undergraduate Experience**

USC has continued to showcase its diversity in recent years as a selling point to attract the world's best students—not only in its broad commitment across many academic fields but also as the home to more international students than nearly any other American university. With its location in the heart of Southern California and its global heritage, USC could position itself as a dynamic and inviting place for the world's most ambitious young scholars.

It was increasingly clear to the university's leaders that the coming century would be more globally interconnected and would belong to those who could build productive connections, not only across academic disciplines but also between cultures and nationalities. And it was naturally evident that some regions would have a greater impact on emerging economic sectors than others.

The university's current student body hails from 128 nations, with exceptional representation from the areas likely to generate the most economic and cultural energy in coming decades—specifically the Pacific Rim and Latin America, including China, India, and Brazil. This diversity benefits both domestic and international students, enabling them to form relationships with peers from around the world who can later become their partners and creative collaborators in the new global village.

USC is also home to some 90 different formal religious views, as well as many informal ones. On campus, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and humanists come together to explore ideas, consider differences, and care for one another. The Office of the Provost pointed this broad community toward a vision that married the search for meaning with USC's core, uncompromisable priorities regarding intellectual freedom. Varun Soni, USC's dean of religious life and the first Hindu to hold such a position at an American university, shepherds an ecumenical army of chaplains who both minister to their individual flocks and connect them to the larger academic community.



USC's annual New Student Convocation in Alumni Park: They come from all 50 states and 115 nations, but they leave as Trojans for life, bound across continents and generations. In the first year of his presidency, Nikias expanded the ceremony significantly to create a more dramatic rite of passage for incoming students and their parents.



### **A Great University Cannot Be Franchised**

A central belief guiding the university's leaders was that its future lay in building the best learning environment possible on its Los Angeles campuses—rather than in franchising the USC experience through either foreign satellite campuses or online undergraduate programs. This placed USC in contrast with some of its peers. New York University, for example, was aggressively developing campuses in the Middle East and Asia, while Stanford and MIT were working on free, massive open online courses (MOOCs) to make their undergraduate offerings available worldwide.



Varun Soni, dean of religious life, is the first Hindu to serve in such a role at an American university. He chaplains a global student community representing more than 90 religious views.

President Nikias has been an ardent and unapologetic champion of the culture that exists on a great university campus. “There is a reason that American research universities have remained the envy of the world and a magnet drawing the world’s best minds,” he said. “There is a unique environment in these universities and a set of nonnegotiable principles: a commitment to freedom of academic inquiry and expression, gender equality, entrepreneurialism and shrewd risk-taking, the relentless search for truth, to diversity and even to old-fashioned school spirit. A hamburger may taste the same in Boston or Bahrain, but a great university experience like the one at USC cannot be franchised elsewhere. Instead, we must protect it and refine it on our own campus.”

Administrators and faculty viewed the ever-rising popularity of USC as a boon—but also as an obligation. “If we’re bringing in the best students in every kind of field from around the world,” Nikias told alumni supporters, “then we owe it to them to give them the best learning experience possible—a singular kind of experience they can’t get elsewhere. We need to find the resources to make this happen.”

One key step in building that environment involved becoming a truly residential university. Despite USC’s renown for school spirit, just a generation



Author Pico Iyer offers the keynote address at USC’s 2015 Baccalaureate Ceremony. The multi-faith celebration, held annually in Bovard Auditorium on the eve of commencement exercises, has in recent years drawn a slate of renowned speakers, including actor and humanitarian Rainn Wilson and journalists Lisa Ling and Krista Tippett.



earlier it served as a commuter college for the majority of its students. A succession of administrations understood that the university's commitment to quality would require creating an atmosphere in which undergraduates, graduates, and faculty could all play active roles in a totally immersive academic community. With each passing decade, facilities had been added as steps toward that goal.

Over the past five years, USC has finally established itself as a genuinely residential university, with what Nikias called a "24/7 learning and living environment, both inside and outside the classroom." All campus dormitories have been reconfigured as residential colleges, complete with faculty masters and a slate of regularly planned academic and cultural activities. The experience is closer to the classic European college model, while simultaneously tapping



into the full cultural offerings of Southern California.

The groundbreaking of USC Village in the fall of 2014 represented another major milestone. When complete, this housing and retail development will serve as the communal center of the academic and local community. It will also include the USC Kathleen L. McCarthy Honors College, which will house some 600 of the university's most talented undergraduates.

### **Recruiting the Best and Brightest Across All Boundaries**

With the increasing power of the USC brand, student interest in the university has continued to rise. Both the caliber and the diversity of the freshman class have grown incrementally each year, despite the challenge of making annual



In 2014, work begins on the \$650 million USC Village, north of the University Park Campus, slated for completion in 2017. Representing the largest development project in the history of South Los Angeles, USC Village will add 2,700 student beds and complete USC's generation-long transformation from commuter school to first-rate residential university.



The “V for Victory” salute binds all members of the Trojan Family, whether they are celebrating USC spirit on campus or encountering fellow alumni in far-flung locations around the world.

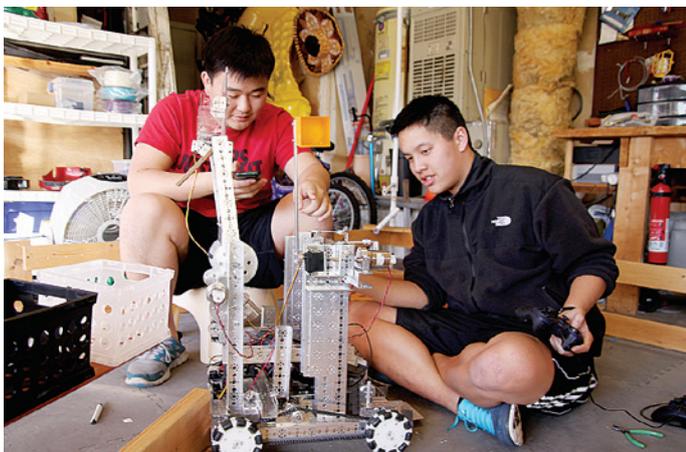
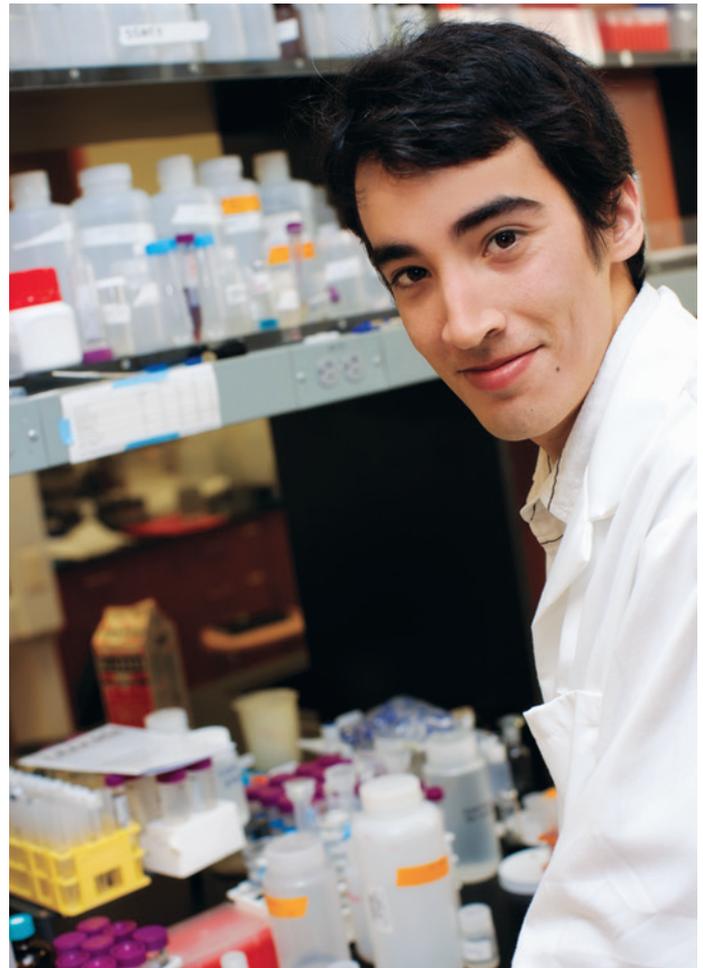
progress in student quality at a school that was already highly selective. This trend was not serendipity but rather a coordinated and structured effort of the admissions staff.

In 2009, Nikias, who was then provost, worked with Katharine Harrington, who oversaw both undergraduate and graduate admissions and financial aid, to develop an undergraduate recruiting strategy that brought in the highest level of students while being simultaneously far-reaching and inclusive of many underserved communities.

The strategy was both national and global in scope. While the university traditionally brought in undergraduates from across the country, the leadership made a symbolic decision in 2010 to represent all 50 states in each freshman class, through more intentional recruiting in all regions.

“Before Provost Nikias asked us to dramatically extend our reach, we were visiting about 600 high schools a year, all in the U.S.,” said Harrington. “But there are many more excellent high schools than that. And there are about 2,700 seats in the freshman class each year. We were given the resources we needed, and now we visit more than 2,200 schools in all 50 states, and in 15 other countries. This has made a tremendous difference in our ability to attract the best and brightest students from all over the United States and the world.”





Mork Scholars arrive on Catalina Island (left) for a weekend-long retreat at the USC Wrigley Institute for Environmental Studies. Later in the weekend, President Nikias and Trustee John Mork hold an informal conversation with the Mork Scholars (above left). Mark Torres (right) is a PhD candidate in earth sciences and a recipient of the William M. Keck Foundation Graduate Endowed Fellowship. Stamps Scholar Eric Deng (bottom left) and Clay Shieh construct a robot for an academic competition.

“I offered Katharine up to 50 new staff positions to build the sort of recruitment force necessary for our strategy,” Nikias said. “But she’s been making it work with just 35. Katharine and her team have worked incredibly well along the way.”

The student body also reflected a level of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity rare for a private university. Some 23 percent of the freshman class in 2015 was made up of underrepresented minorities. Among the nation’s 35 leading private universities, USC ranked first in the enrollment of underrepresented minorities, in total numbers and percentage of the total student body (counting both undergraduate and graduate students). It also ranked first in the enrollment of Hispanic students, in both total numbers and percentage; and second in the enrollment of African-American students in total numbers.

As a national debate raged over whether the country’s premier colleges were doing enough to create access for economically disadvantaged students, USC’s efforts reflected the high priority the university placed on ensuring that talented young people from every walk of life could benefit from the unique experience and educational opportunities it had to offer.

Accordingly, its leaders focused on restructuring administrative processes to maximize money directed to student scholarships. This commitment resulted in an unrestricted financial-aid pool of \$300 million from USC’s own sources—the largest offered by any American university. And it represented a



A student in the USC Roski School of Art and Design meticulously brings a design to life. The university has boosted funding support for all of its top graduate students, in order to strengthen its position as a place where the most promising scholars of the next generation could achieve their full potential.

65 percent surge over the \$180 million it had offered just five years earlier.

Another remarkable figure is that about one in seven incoming Trojans represented the first generation in his or her family to attend college. Approximately 23 percent were from lower-income families eligible for federal Pell Grant assistance. *The New York Times* reported that USC ranked third nationally among private institutions in Pell Grant enrollment, and first among those west of Chicago.

USC also stepped up its traditional practice of welcoming high-need transfer students who had proved their academic mettle at community colleges. In 2014, USC brought in 824 community-college transfer students, mostly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to complement its 18,000-strong undergraduate population. Tellingly, most of the university's private school peers did not accept such transfers.

President Nikias wrote a feature article in *The Washington Post* that fall, suggesting that USC's peers follow its lead and begin to accept transfers from community colleges, so that private universities as a group could help solve the college-access problem that vexed so many families, experts, and policy makers. Nikias pointed out that 91 percent of USC's community-college transfers went on to earn degrees, a figure roughly equal to the overall student population. This,



The new Wallis Annenberg Hall, opened in 2014, boasts a state-of-the-art newsroom, the Chen/Moonves and CBS Media Center, which quickly became the envy of both working professionals and peer schools of communications and journalism.



he argued, should negate any concerns that those students would diminish the effectiveness or brand of private school educations.

While students at some universities were graduating with high levels of debt, about half of USC undergraduates completed their education with no outstanding loans. Those who did take on debt left owing an average of \$23,000, a very manageable figure by national standards. And while default rates of 10 percent or higher were not uncommon on student loans, the average figure at USC was less than 1.6 percent.

USC's strategy was proving successful in providing the resources to allow qualified students from all backgrounds to enter the university—and to minimize the number of graduates burdened with long-term educational debt. In the crucial area of making sure entering students become degree



USC has made it a priority to support and honor Trojans who serve in the American armed forces. At the 2012 Veterans Appreciation Dinner, Trustee William Schoen (left) dons a personalized USC bomber jacket presented to him by Colonel Alvah E. Ingersoll III of the USC Naval ROTC. Schoen and his wife, Sharon, have generously supported scholarships for veterans at the university.

recipients, USC has made steady progress, by increasing the amount of financial aid available to families in need, creating a stronger residential university experience, and improving student access to effective academic advisement. In 2010, USC's graduation rate stood at 89 percent—an impressive rise from a few decades earlier, when it was a fairly ordinary 55 or 60 percent. And by 2015, that rate had risen to 92 percent, joining the rarefied heights of truly elite institutions.

### **Serving Those Who Serve the Nation**

After World War II, the GI Bill made higher education and a better life available to millions of returning veterans, lifting the larger economy and society in the process. Faithful to that spirit, USC has taken special actions in recent years to open its doors to those committed to national service, and to support its military student population—which in 2015 numbered nearly 1,000 veterans and ROTC participants.

David Petraeus, retired four-star general and ex-CIA director, joined the university in 2013 as a Judge Widney Professor and took these students under his wing as an adviser. And Trustee Edward P. Roski Jr., both a former chair of the USC board and a former Marine, led the effort to establish an annual event honoring the students' service to the United States. The Veterans Appreciation Dinner has become one of the university's most cherished traditions.

### **Improving Graduate Education**

As the USC undergraduate experience gained “buzz” nationally and internationally, the next opportunity—and imperative—was to strengthen the graduate programs across the university's 19 independent schools and associated



Retired four-star general David Petraeus leads students on a morning run through the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. He joined the USC faculty as a Judge Widney Professor in 2013, with a particular focus on developing and mentoring ROTC students.

academic research centers. USC was actively cultivating a reputation as a place where the top scholars of tomorrow—the very best graduate, doctoral, and postdoctoral students—congregated. This reputation was crucial to attracting the funding and support necessary for USC’s signature research initiatives.

Shortly after Nikias became provost in 2005, USC began allocating internal funding to new categories of exceptional graduate students, luring many away from other premier research universities. Later, under both Nikias and his successor as provost, Elizabeth Garrett, USC expanded its efforts to gain external support for PhD and postdoctoral students, as graduates with a track record of outside funding are more competitive in the job market and more likely to go on to shape the future of their respective disciplines.

These initiatives have shown clear results. The number of PhD students at USC with NSF Graduate Research Fellowships has grown dramatically, increasing more than tenfold in less than a decade, from three in 2007 to 32 in 2015. And in the 2015–2016 academic year alone, 73 USC doctoral students secured major nationally competitive awards, including:

- Seven National Institutes of Health National Research Service Award fellowships;
- Three Department of Defense National Defense Science and Engineering Graduate fellowships;

- Three Department of State Fulbright fellowships;
- Three Haynes Foundation fellowships; and
- Three NSF Dissertation Research Improvement Grants.

USC's PhD students also received fellowships from the Department of Energy, NASA, the Social Science Research Council, the Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the American Association of University Women. As the year began to unfold, USC students were selected for a Google Dissertation Fellowship, a finalist spot in the Fannie and John Hertz Fellowship, and many other honors.

USC also significantly boosted its postdoctoral fellows program, increasing the number at the university and its affiliates to more than 600 by 2015. Additionally, the Graduate School at USC launched a PhD Achievement Award for those who demonstrated exceptional accomplishments during their Trojan careers, based on overall record, publications, job offers, and other honors. As of 2015, 21 students had received the award, representing the Dornsife College, Marshall School, Viterbi School, and Annenberg School, among others.

### **Reshaping the Online Education Revolution**

By 2011, several leading universities had begun offering some of their courses free on the Internet, open to anyone who wanted to benefit from the expertise of elite faculty. These classes—known as “massive open online courses,” or MOOCs, for short—were intended to make those schools’ undergraduate offerings accessible to hundreds of millions around the world.

Waves of enthusiasm and excitement—as well as concern—swept the landscape of academia, media, and government. Had society finally found a low cost or even free way to educate its billions of young citizens? Would traditional university campuses become obsolete? Many experts even pronounced that 2013 would be “the year of the MOOC.” The mad scramble was on to build a virtual university that could do what traditional schools seemingly could not. Smart institutions knew that they needed to take a leadership role in the technological vanguard, or risk being pushed aside.

USC's approach was contrarian, based on its distinct academic values. In a lengthy report to the university community in August 2012, Nikias pointed



USC graduation, a beloved family tradition since 1884, takes on a modern touch during the 132nd annual commencement ceremony in 2015. The university now confers some 15,000 degrees annually at the undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and professional levels.



to some changes as inevitable but dismissed others as hype. Crucially, he announced that USC had decided not to develop online degree programs for undergraduates. This policy was rooted in a core belief that the best learning experience is inherently social at the undergraduate level. This meant that the university would continue to develop an unrivaled experience for students—characterized by the diversity and intellectual breadth of its student body, its array of cultural opportunities, and the establishment of a fully immersive, residential learning and living environment.

However, Nikias went on to say that *graduate* education was ripe for reinvention through the opportunities offered by online interaction. Here he credited the faculty with finding a path that wed classic, uncompromising



academic values with new technology. “Quietly and without fanfare,” he wrote, USC’s faculty had developed a “global online graduate education enterprise that features academic breadth and economic viability.” The USC model, which focused on graduate as well as continuing and professional studies, made a first-rate education possible for people in 40 nations, Nikias wrote, “while maintaining the all-important standards of academic rigor, integrity, and quality.”

This balance was far harder to accomplish than many experts in academia and the media had initially realized. By 2013, a considerable backlash against MOOCs was under way. Media reports noted that once one looked



After being pronounced “Trojans for life,” prepared to navigate together the uncertainties and adventures before them, USC graduates celebrate the beginning of a new chapter.

past the hyperbole, it was clear that most online education programs had terrible academic outcomes and unsustainable business models.

Meanwhile, at USC, an impressive 8,700 tuition-paying students were enrolled in online graduate programs by 2015. Revenues had by then reached \$150 million, an unprecedented figure for any traditional, nonprofit American university. USC’s programs were life-changing for many. In one example, the spouse of a military service member interviewed for a university news outlet said she was grateful for the ability to pursue quality graduate education in social work, despite the prospect of frequent relocation.

A particularly notable offering was developed at USC’s Rossier School of Education: Its lauded Master of Arts in Teaching online program now serves hundreds of students and professionals around the country. The MAT 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.

Nikias expressed pride that USC’s online graduate students were becoming increasingly integrated into the overall university community. “Online and hybrid program students are creating their own USC student organizations,” he wrote, “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 USC leaders believed that the university was in a position to build a distinct experience and brand that could not be replicated—in either the virtual world or the traditional one. In that sense, the Trojans were once again using disruption and uncertainty as their allies in realizing their destiny.

# In Memoriam

*USC graduate students Ming Qu and Ying Wu, both 23 and from China, were killed in Los Angeles in April 2012. In July 2014, Xinran Ji, a 24-year-old graduate student from China, was killed near campus. Both tragedies provoked international outpourings of grief and prayer. The events also spurred the USC community to enhance security measures*

*on campus and in USC's surrounding urban Los Angeles neighborhoods.*

*A week and a half after the 2012 incident, President Nikias appeared at a gala dinner held by the Committee of 100 to accept its Advancement of U.S.-China Relations award on behalf of USC. In his remarks, the president spoke of an unwavering determination to work toward creating*

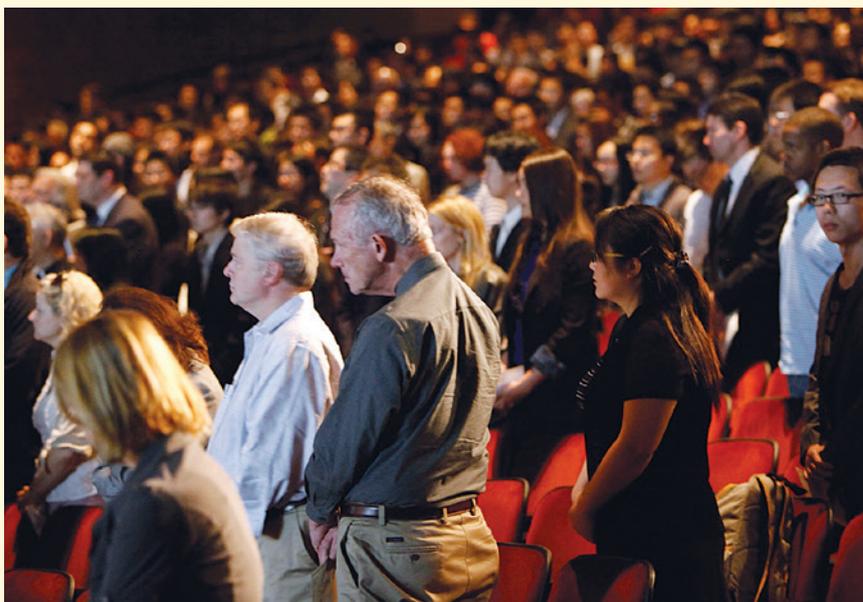


*the best possible living and learning environment for USC students from every state and nation.*

*“Death and life indeed have their determined appointments. Riches and honor indeed depend on the mercies of heaven,” Ninkias said, echoing the words of Confucius. “But we each—we all—have roles to play, to bring*

*the best of heaven here today, for our families and our communities.”*

*President Ninkias reiterated that commitment in an address to members of the university community later that year, saying, “Adversity makes us stronger, more focused and more determined to achieve our noble goals.”*



LEFT AND ABOVE: President Ninkias honors the late Ming Qu and Ying Wu at a massive memorial service held for the grieving Trojan Family at the Shrine Auditorium.

TOP: Xinran Ji, a graduate student at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, lost his life in July 2014.