

“CHORYU—The Current:”
**An interview with Dr. C. L. Max Nikias,
president, the University of Southern California**

A perspective on learning from the world’s diversity

As the oldest private university on the U.S. west coast, the University of Southern California fosters an environment of learning from the world’s diversity, while also forming partnerships with Japanese universities and companies.

Founded in 1880, USC has graduated a long list of illustrious alumni, including former Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Miki

Q: Tell us about the distinctive characteristics and mission of the University of Southern California.

A: USC is a private university that leads the world in a wide range of research fields. It opened in 1880 with a faculty of 10 and a student body of 53. Japanese students attended the university from the outset, and in fact the first visiting students’ organization at the school was the Japanese Student Association, founded in 1910. USC has deep ties with Japan. Prominent graduates include the former Japanese prime minister, Takeo Miki, who graduated in 1935, and the current prime minister, Shinzo Abe, studied at USC in the 1970s. I am proud that two Japanese prime ministers attended our university. USC’s mission is simple. First, we create human connections with the next generation through education. Second, we discover and give rise to new knowledge as a research institution.

Q: Tell us about the size of the university and its graduates. We’ve heard that the university has many foreign students.

A: Of the approximately 3,000 universities in the United States, the top 60 schools share a common trait: they produce major research results, in addition to educating students. In a worldwide ranking of universities, USC is among the top 100 (currently ranked 60th worldwide and 15th within the United States). We have 22 university departments and more than 100 research institutes. More than 44,000 students are currently studying at our university departments and graduate schools, and we have 4,190 full-time employees. Our graduates and alumni include actor John Wayne, astronaut Neil Armstrong, film directors George Lucas and Robert Zemeckis, and architect Frank Gehry.

During the fall 2016 term, we admitted 13,340 foreign students, making us the second-ranked school in the United States in terms of numbers of foreign students. Of these students, 197 are from Japan. Our students come from 128 countries and all 50 U.S. states,

and represent at least 90 different religious viewpoints. This makes USC a true microcosm of the world populace. Today, as globalism continues to advance, I believe that this kind of environment is crucial, one in which students with diverse linguistic, national, and cultural backgrounds learn from each other.

Q: You held the USC Global Conference 2017 in Tokyo in September.

A: As a research institution, USC began holding these events about 10 years ago in order to broadly share knowledge in academic, private industry, and public policy circles, as well as with the general public. We hold them about every other year at various locations in Asia. This was the second time we held one in Tokyo. We had Sony President Kazuo Hirai together with a dean from our university to discuss topics such as virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and other creative efforts applying new technologies. During the conference, we had about 14 presentations and panels.

Profound scholarship throughout diverse departments

Q: There are Japanese private universities with numerous departments, but 22 departments is a large number, isn’t it?

A: The largest unit in scale is our Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, in which 42 percent of our students are enrolled. Also, partly because of our proximity to Hollywood, we have a world-class School of Cinematic Arts. There are divisions for video game design and communication media studies, as well as engineering. We have become the No. 1-ranked U.S. school in terms of number of academic departments.

Director Steven Spielberg, a USC trustee, guest lectures in our School of Cinematic Arts from time to time, and our faculty also includes numerous Academy Award-winning filmmakers, renowned game designers, and media producers. In fact, people working with us have won a total of 77 Oscars. In addition, we have a partnership with game designer Sony Interactive Entertainment, through which our students and faculty have released game projects.

Q: We've heard that you are conducting research in some rather unique areas.

A: Our School of Gerontology is the world's oldest and largest. We are particularly strong in the basic biological sciences, social and behavioral sciences, as well as political science. We are moving forward with a wide range of research related to aging. In the field of personal care for elders, we have a partnership with Japan's Yamano Beauty College.

In 2015, we established the Alzheimer's Therapeutic Research Institute, which entered into a collaborative partnership this year with the Graduate School and Faculty of Medicine in Osaka City University. We are linking up with clinical research efforts in Japan regarding dementia, and building similar facilities in Japan and the United States so that we can advance clinical research on a global basis. We are moving forward on joint efforts with Japan that also include pharmaceuticals, and the USC School of Architecture. For example, we are conducting joint research on how civil engineering relates to tsunami events. Our newest professional school, the Kaufman School of Dance, formed just a few years ago, and is making progress.

Q: Are there any distinctive characteristics that make your curricula and policies special?

A: In order to allow our students to pursue a diverse range of academic disciplines, we make it possible for them to minor in a subject and attend classes in departments other than that of their major. This makes it possible to achieve a greater depth of scholarship. But this is more than just broad learning. For instance, we might recommend that a student majoring in engineering pursue a minor in cinematic arts, or that a journalism major pursue a minor in business.

We also recommend that students spend one term abroad for a wider range of experience. Each year, about 3,000 of our students go abroad. And during each of the past four years, we have had about 100 students study abroad in Japan.

Q: What message would you like to convey to today's high school students who intend to go to college?

A: Medical advances and other developments are leading to greater human longevity than ever before. By the time today's high school students reach adulthood, human lifespans are forecast to be even longer than they are now. For example, the day may come in which today's life expectancies of 80 years are extended by another 20 years, so that people live to be 90 and 100. When you look at it that way, one's work activity in such a long life probably won't be limited to just one career, and even

within the bounds of each career, one's work experience will likely not be limited to one job, but include many. We therefore have to rethink the role that a person between the ages of 18 and 22 plays on a college campus. It becomes extremely crucial to achieve depth and breadth of study by experiencing learning outside of one's academic major. It seems to me that this kind of experience will build the foundation for the student's future career.

Fostering an international campus environment

Q: What results have you produced by admitting many international students?

A: The educational experience USC offers—which brings together our domestic students and foreign students, all of whom are drawn from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds—creates a microcosm of the real world. This is true not just of our student body, but our faculty as well, which comprises members from 40 nationalities other than the U.S. I think this has a positive influence on our students. At USC, both faculty and students have diverse cultures and religions. I think that it is important not only to learn from the diverse ideas of each other, but also to learn how to live alongside each other on campus.

Q: What are your thoughts on how the campus environment is maintained?

A: We currently operate on a residential college dormitory system. Students can live together in residential colleges not only on campus, but also off campus as they pursue their studies. We have just completed a "USC Village" that encompasses eight residential colleges. Its design closely mirrors the models of Oxford and Cambridge universities. We are therefore not planning to increase departmental student numbers above current levels at present. We expect the numbers of our online students to increase among adults with active careers and those engaged in lifelong learning as we move forward, so we must tailor our future educational activities to their special characteristics.

Q: A word for Japan's high school educators, please.

A: These youth will form the next generation living in a global community, so we must convey to them how crucial it is to adopt an international perspective on learning. At the same time, it is very important to learn the languages of other countries. While obtaining an international perspective on economic, political, and societal events, I think that the situation requires education from the perspective of learning from diverse value systems, cultures, and faiths.

