Dean’s Annual Address to the USC Dornsife Community

Amber D. Miller, Ph.D.
October 23, 2019

This time last year, I really hoped we were done with the bad news; the scandals, the headlines, and the series of heartbreaking realizations that our students had been put in harm’s way.

As you know we weren’t done. There was more to come, with serious consequences. Our university today is facing weakened trust among our students, parents, and alums and very real reputational, administrative, and budgetary challenges that have tangible impacts on all of us. I am acutely aware this makes it all the more difficult for you to write your next book or develop a new curriculum, much less recruit excellent colleagues and PhD students, when so many resources are going toward managing the fallout.

Not surprisingly, many of you have asked me in more or less subtle ways if I am planning to leave. I’m here to tell you that I’m not going anywhere.

Here at USC Dornsife, I get to lead a community that includes dozens of members of prestigious national academies and scholars who have been recognized with the highest honors in their field — including MacArthur, Guggenheim, Pulitzer, and Nobel Prizes. Despite the challenges, so many of you have rolled up your sleeves and done great things. I’m not going anywhere, because I believe in our USC Dornsife community. This is a community that is more than a collection of celebrated scholars and excellent teachers. Our community exemplifies what the core of a university should stand for: honesty, integrity, and curiosity.

But it’s more than that.

We are a community that believes in research excellence, but that is not afraid to define scholarly areas in new ways. We believe deeply in a liberal arts education, but we are not bound to a centuries-old curriculum. We take pride in our intellectual endeavors, but we do not need to keep them locked within the ivory tower. And we share an uncommon desire to make our scholarship count.

If we continue to pull together, to trust each other, and to work toward being the very best, I believe we can do more than come out of this difficult time with our heads held high. I believe we can become the place that sets the bar for excellence in research and
teaching, and we can be the place that defines a new way for our expertise to impact the world.

Working together over the past three years, we have already accomplished a surprising amount — and we are just getting started. Let me update you on where we stand on some of our key initiatives and give you a sense of where I see things going over the coming year.

**Progress on Academic Plan and Research Excellence**

First, your divisional deans continue to work with chairs and directors toward the goal of elevating each department, center, and institute to preeminence. For some departments, that means building on existing strength. For others, it means investing in new research areas where USC Dornsife can leapfrog our peers and own intellectual spaces before someone else can.

As you all know, the key is to attract and retain the very best people. Despite the university’s challenges, this has been going well. Our new hires — both junior and senior — have been outstanding, and we have significantly improved our retention numbers. We have also been able to raise resources to help a number of our centers and institutes grow, develop, or expand to do new things.

The Dornsife-wide themes are moving forward on two pathways. First, many of you have been involved in developing ideas for new centers around the themes of our strategic plan. We provided study funding to 15 faculty-led groups last spring to develop these ideas, and proposals for more significant seed funding for a few of these are due on November 1. There will be another opportunity for new working groups to propose study funding again this winter.

In parallel, we are working on pulling together all of our sustainability efforts across Dornsife. We’re focused on this at the highest level because so many of our faculty are already involved, and because this is the most existential challenge facing society today. We need to do our part. President Folt cares about this, too. She has launched a task force to think about what can be done campus-wide, and a number of our faculty are involved.

USC Dornsife has incredible strength already on the scientific side — in Loker, Spatial Sciences, Wrigley, Earth Sciences, Marine Biology, Chemistry, and Prediction Science — that we will continue to build. But we have another opportunity that (to my knowledge), no major university has figured out how to properly leverage. We as a society
haven’t figured out how to convince people to get off their duffs and implement the scientific and technical solutions that already exist.

We want to pull together our many existing efforts in the social sciences and develop some new ones under the banner of a newly imagined Wrigley Institute for Environmental Studies. Our plan is to recruit two new directors, one from natural sciences and one from social sciences, to lead an initiative that combines the power of both of these areas.

**Undergraduate Education**

I would like to turn to undergraduate education. Many of you have been working with Andy Stott on “The Dornsife Idea,” and there is now a substantial body of work to show for it. The goal is twofold: to combine the best liberal arts traditions with modern curricular innovation to set a new standard for a 21st century liberal arts education; and to help everyone understand that a USC Dornsife education, not a professional school education, is what will best-prepare students to be the leaders of tomorrow.

The elements of this program include developing a first year experience combining curriculum, programming, and advising. Students will no longer be forced to choose a major when they apply (but they may still declare at any time). Whether or not they know their major, students will enter as a member of a Scholarly Community — groupings of majors that serve as a gateway to a range of related fields. A few of the working titles include Life Sciences, Global Systems, Language and Creativity, and Culture and Society. Each cohort will have focused events that build community, as well as integrated General Education and overview courses.

To support this new design, centralized advising for first-year students will be organized into disciplinary hubs to help students identify their goals and interests, introduce them to the full range of majors, and help ground them in fundamentals. We are also working on ideas to innovate the curriculum. G.E. sequences, for example, would allow students to engage with an overarching theme from different angles. And we are in the process of creating the USC Dornsife Center for Applied Learning and Life Beyond College to provide one-stop access to all of our opportunities that go beyond the classroom.

Additionally, to make sure that all of our students receive not only a proper liberal arts education, but also the practical skills to hit the ground running when they graduate, we will be rolling out the first set of our new Dornsife Toolkit courses beginning this spring. A couple of examples include Activism and Advocacy, Financial Literacy, and Communication skills.
Andy will keep you up to date throughout the year as this evolves. I want to thank those of you who have been instrumental in building this initiative so far, and I hope you'll continue to contribute as this all comes together.

**Graduate and Professional Education**

We are also making significant progress on graduate education. As I said when I arrived, I don’t buy into the idea that PhD programs should shrink in response to a more competitive job market. Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but I still believe that we need more—not fewer—highly educated people in this country. We just need to make sure that we’re giving our students the competitive edge and preparing them for the full range of job opportunities.

During the past three years, our PhD programs have grown by an average of 11%, and we are continuing to look for resources for growth. Our PhDs are being placed in the academy at a rate higher than average, and the number of externally funded students has increased 61% since our team came on board.

Most notably, we have done something that (as far as I’m aware), no one else has done in a structured way. We have brought together PhD students across all disciplines in USC Dornsife to give them the skills that will prepare them for success both inside and outside the academy. After a successful pilot last year, the PhD Academy is now in full swing with our entire incoming cohort of students. Academy workshops cover topics such as navigating graduate school; communicating scholarship to different audiences; and leadership, management, and negotiating skills. We have been polling students after every seminar, and we are continually working to make the PhD Academy better. If you have input or ideas, please reach out to Steve Finkel or his team and share them. And please, encourage your students to come to these workshops.

With the arrival of George Ingersoll, we are now prepared to help departments bring new MA programs online. We have developed a revenue sharing model that gives a portion of MA revenue to the department that mounts the program to support your academic goals. We’ve also produced a new set of common guidelines and key considerations for all new master’s and certificate programs. And a newly launched Master’s Programs Leadership Council shares best practices and works through challenges across our departments. I am optimistic that this will open up new revenue streams to support your academic priorities, but keep in mind that no program will be approved just to generate revenue. All proposed programs must be supported by their home
departments, demonstrate that they make intellectual sense, and provide a tangible benefit to the students.

**Key Initiatives**

There are two other pieces of our overall Strategic Plan on which we have made some impressive strides. The first is our work to expand not only diversity, but also equity and inclusion. As you all know, this has been one of my top priorities since arriving here at USC. Since our team has been working on this, we have seen a steady improvement along several measures. Comparing Dornsife faculty data from 2013-2016 with that from 2016-2019:

- URM hires have increased from 7% to 29%.
- URM tenure approvals has climbed from 67% to 80%.
- URM departures has dropped by nearly a factor of three.
- Our percentage of new female hires grew from 36% to 50%.
- Our percentage of female department chairs has risen by 36%

This is great improvement, but we're not yet where we want to be — and faculty diversity is only one pillar of our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan, led by Kimberly Freeman. Another key aspect is making sure that everyone who is here feels safe, respected, and at home. We are also developing new ideas to continue to improve the pipeline, helping young scholars with a diverse profile succeed in PhD programs and climbing the academy ranks.

The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan can be found on our website [https://dornsife.usc.edu/diversity-materials/](https://dornsife.usc.edu/diversity-materials/). This is a living document that will continue to evolve. Please feel free to reach out to Kimberly any time with ideas.

A second initiative that has really started to take off is The Academy in the Public Square. I know from intimate personal experience how annoying it can be when a leader arrives with a pet project and asks that everyone get onboard. So I want to thank all of you for humoring me on my drive to build this initiative.

But it is not okay that fewer than 10% of the articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* this year and fewer than 10% of the sessions and panels at major educational conferences have anything to do with research. And it is not okay for our politicians to dismiss what we do as esoteric and out of touch, when we have built the foundation for
almost every major advance our society has seen in the past 50 years. We as a university community need to put our research mission back in the public eye.

    Our idea is to build a hub that can match government, nonprofit, and commercial partners with the academic expertise they need to address big, pressing problems — problems such as energy, transportation, public health, and climate change. We can use these projects to remind the public that we, as academic researchers, are an indispensable resource that they need to keep supporting.

    With only a single fulltime employee and the engagement of many of you, we have made enormous progress setting up a set of pilot projects that prove the concept. I hope it has been a rewarding experience for those of you who have participated. Our goal is not just to get this right here at USC Dornsife, but to provide a model for other universities to copy. Imagine not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of academic experts easily accessible to our governments, policy makers, and the business community. Please reach out to Kate Weber, our executive director, if you would like to learn more or to get involved.

    I hope this 100,000 foot look makes you feel proud of what we have already accomplished together. But many of you are already up to speed. So many of our faculty and staff have been down in the trenches, giving your time and insight to make sure that we as an academic community bring our best to the table. I want to thank you all for the work that you do every day.

    I want to thank the Dornsife Faculty Council for helping us improve faculty governance and making sure the full range of voices are heard. I want to thank my council of chairs and directors for connecting our leadership team to all of you, and for being an outstanding sounding board. And I want to thank everyone on my team; these folks work really hard every day to help me and all of you accomplish what we are working toward.

    Before I wrap up, I would like to share a story with you from last spring. As you know, in April we hosted a gala to launch our new USC Dornsife fundraising campaign around our strategic priorities.

    We had postponed it twice to find a time when our donors would be thinking of something other than the series of scandals related to USC’s medical services. As the spring of 2019 approached, we were finally starting to put some distance between us and the LA Times. There was an encouraging push in the central administration to change the university culture and reestablish trust.
Then, just two weeks before the gala, the admission scandal broke. I was devastated, as I know you were. We seriously considered postponing the gala again. But as I thought about it, I realized that canceling was exactly the wrong thing to do.

We had been working so hard to build on our core academic missions of knowledge production and education, and to develop a new way for universities to engage the public. We had been developing a narrative that had nothing to do with scandals or dysfunction — a narrative based on the central values of academic integrity and solving the problems facing our strained world. It was not the time to be afraid to tell our story. It was time to put our Dornsife story forward as a new direction for USC.

I admit, it was a big risk. I didn’t know if people were ready for this new narrative.

But they were.

The gala was incredible. There were more trustees in attendance than I had ever seen at a university fundraising event. Mayor Garcetti gave a terrific speech, telling everyone that he admires what we are doing and that our city is a willing partner — ready to work with us. In the weeks that followed, a huge number of people made a point of telling me how enthusiastic they were about our vision. They were happy to hear about a focus on academic values, excellence in research, and giving students every advantage possible as they head out into the world.

It has been a tough few years for fundraising, but those donors who have been making gifts are responding to our message. While overall support at the university is indeed down, USC Dornsife was the lead fundraising unit last year. People are beginning to understand that we have extraordinary intellectual capacity at Dornsife — and that our strength lies in both a commitment to foundational research and the agility to put our expertise to work in our communities. They are beginning to understand that our greatest strength is our faculty.

Great universities don’t lead with medical schools or professional schools. They don’t lead with villages or stadiums. Great universities lead with groundbreaking research, and innovative educational programs. Great universities lead with their schools of Letters, Arts, and Sciences.

At a moment ready for change, our Dornsife community is building the forward-thinking core of the university that is fit to take that lead.