Listening to Students

Spring 2006 Findings

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Background and Project Focus

In 2006, as part of an ongoing effort to better understand students’ perceptions of the undergraduate experience, USC’s Division of Student Affairs undertook a research project in which staff members held informal interviews with undergraduate students. Over the years, Student Affairs has undertaken many efforts to gauge students’ experience and opinion through the use of surveys. All incoming freshmen and transfers are given the opportunity to complete a survey for new students. Exiting seniors are also surveyed, as well as commuter students and students in residential housing. While these research efforts offer value in terms of their aggregate findings for the class, and comparability with survey results from other institutions, due to their often impersonal nature, these surveys should be supplemented with other data collection efforts. In this spirit, Student Affairs determined that one-to-one conversations between undergraduate students and key representatives in the division would enable the university to further understand students’ perceptions. In addition to yielding potentially valuable student data, the project would also allow students to meet and develop advisor/mentor relationships with Student Affairs staff.

Methodology and Sample

In fall 2005, Student Affairs staff determined the scope and format of the project, named the “Listening to Students” project. The goal was to create an environment in which students are encouraged to discuss what is important to them with a modest amount of direction from interviewers. While there would be a script of questions and discussion points, the students could direct the course and tone of the interview through their responses. The project questionnaire would provide a structure to allow common themes and topics to be discussed, but the students could dictate the focus of the interview and address areas of importance to them. By designing the interview in this way, Student Affairs determined that students would be better able to discuss their experiences without having expectations imposed on them by the interviewers. Interviewers
determined the exact wording and format of the interview protocol. Interview questions and
discussion points are provided in Appendix A, *Listening to Students Interview Guidelines*.

In spring 2006, 52 Student Affairs staff members were invited or nominated to participate
in the interviewing process. Each individual was asked to dedicate four to five hours per week to
the Listening to Students project. A web portal was designed to allow interviewers to schedule
available time for interviews. Following this, a random sample of 4,000 currently-enrolled
undergraduate students was selected from the student population of 16,177. These students were
invited to volunteer to take part in the project via email (see Appendix B). Students were directed
to the project website, where they could schedule an appointment with participating Student
Affairs staff. For the first several weeks, once they chose an available time, students were
randomly assigned to an interviewer. Approximately mid-way through the semester, in an effort
to encourage student participation, students were allowed to select their interviewer. If students
had no preference, they could be randomly assigned. Confirmation emails were sent to both
interviewers and students.

Interviews took place in staff members’ offices or conference rooms. Generally,
interviews were expected to take between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviewers were expected to print
out the interview protocol and document student responses in the space provided. Following each
interview, interviewers were directed to enter their responses in a web-based data entry form on
the Listening to Students web portal. This data-entry process was expected to take up to 30
minutes.

Between February 1 and April 30, 2006, 102 students participated in the interviews.
Given that 4,000 invitations were emailed, the response rate was low: 2.6%. It may have been
that students were reluctant to spend up to an hour of their time speaking to a university employee
with whom they may have had no personal relationship. Also, the only formal process for
publicizing the Listening to Students initiative was through email. In addition to the original
email sent to students, Student Affairs sent three additional email reminders. Incentives in the
form of a raffle for an iPod and two $50 book store gift certificates were offered to students.

The interviews broke down into three sections:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section I</th>
<th>Student Experiences and Perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences students valued most/least</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reason for applying to/selecting USC</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Approx. 10 minutes</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Section II</th>
<th>Areas of Interest to Staff Member</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up questions based on provocative responses</td>
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<td>Approx. 5-10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<th>Section III</th>
<th>Areas of Specific to the Student Affairs Strategic Plan</th>
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<th>Section IV</th>
<th>Other/Final Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program-specific questions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity for students to address any area of interest</td>
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<td>Approx. 5 minutes</td>
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Prior to the first question, each interviewer was expected to describe his or her role within the Division of Student Affairs. Interviewers could ask the students about their year and major—and any appropriate introductory information to start the conversation. (Information regarding students’ academic year and major was provided to interviewers based on available data in SIS.)

**Summary of Findings**

The following offers a summary of the findings in response to key interview questions.

**Student Experiences and Perceptions: Academics Come to Forefront**

*We’re interested in hearing about your experience here at USC. What have you experienced that you value the most?*

Of the 92 students who gave a specific response to this question, 44 (48%) mentioned
academics as the experience they value the most. This was the most common response of the categories shown in Table 1 (pg. 6). One student specifically cited the “availability and accessibility of faculty.” Another mentioned the “ability to conduct research” and “small class sizes.” One talked about faculty being “nurturing and accepting.” Other students cited the overall academic rigor of USC, the variety of educational opportunities, the reputation of faculty, and the quality of specific programs and majors.

One theme that emerged in the academically-oriented responses to this question was that of intellectually-challenging classes and events. One student said that her history coursework has been “very challenging” and that faculty help students “learn how to think like a modern historian.” Another student discussed the availability and quality of out-of-classroom lectures given in the architecture program. Yet another student talked about the intellectually challenging discussions he has had with faculty and other students in and out of class.

The second most common theme in response to this question related to people and social interactions, with 18 responses (20%). This included students citing “opportunities to make connections with important people” in their field and students making valuable friendships. One student said that, by attending USC, “I have gotten a small college environment in one of the finest universities in the world” and praised the spirit of the people at USC. Others cited the “Trojan family” and the “close-knit community” at USC.

Another common theme, with 12 responses (13%), is the availability of clubs and organizations. This includes fraternities, sororities, volunteer programs, religious organizations, and cultural groups. One student said that being in a fraternity was by far his most valuable experience. Another said that participating in a volunteer program “enhanced my leadership capabilities.”

Other responses to the first question addressed Los Angeles and the community surrounding USC (6 responses), athletic programs (4), diversity of students (4), and housing (3).

With nearly half of students specifically citing academics, and many others mentioning
people and programs directly or indirectly related to academic programs, students’ response to the first question seems to indicate that an intellectually-challenging culture exists at USC. It is telling that so many students immediately think of the academic experiences when offered a general question about their time at USC.

Table 1. Experiences Valued Most by Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic experiences</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and social interactions</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs and organizations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community surrounding USC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic programs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What have you experienced that has been less valuable?

In identifying what students’ find “less valuable” about their USC experience, of the 90 students making a specific response, academics (36 or 40%) was still the most common category (see Table 3 for response categories.) Here, students talked about academics failing to meet their expectations, consistently unavailable programs or classes, and disappointment in the quality of the faculty and instructors.

One student said that the “academic rigor of the school isn’t where I expected it to be” and that the classes are easy and mostly require rote memorization. Another talked about the difficulty to get access to faculty members. Another mentioned the lack of office hours for professors in his department. One student said that her experience in the cinema program has been a “let-down” and that the program was a “big bureaucracy.” Another expressed frustration that her major is no longer offered.

Within this first category, five students mentioned dissatisfaction with General Education (GE) courses—one student stated that the GE courses he took at community college were superior. Other students found the courses pointless or frustrating.
The next most common responses involved housing and services/programs, each with 16 responses (18%). Compared to the first question, housing and residential services was a bigger source of dissatisfaction than satisfaction. Students cited difficulty finding housing, frustrations with roommates, and poor housing quality. One student said, “I like living in the apartments but the parties and the football players are tough to deal with.” Another said that the housing assignment process is overly complex and inefficient.

USC services and programs were also cited as a concern. Students noted problems with advising, dissatisfaction with information received at orientation, lack of services for students with children, and general campus bureaucracy. One common theme that emerged in these responses was dissatisfaction with services for transfer students and those admitted in the spring. Three students specifically said that accessing appropriate services (advising and housing) was more difficult for them because they were transfer students. Three other students said that being admitted in the spring was a disadvantage. —One person noted that it was difficult to establish social relationships in the middle of the year.

Other response categories included clubs/organizations (3 responses), transportation/parking (3), and people/social interactions (3). Only two students cited security problems and only one student mentioned the cost of attending USC. Interestingly, when asked to identify what they found “less valuable” about their USC experience, 10 students (11%) said they could not think of anything.

Again, students are more likely to bring up academic issues and experiences when given a general question about their USC experience. Programs and services important to the student on a day-to-day basis, such as housing, were also often cited as a source of dissatisfaction.
Table 2. Experiences Valued Least by Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic experiences</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services/Programs</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs/Organizations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation/Parking</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/Social Interactions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why did you choose to apply to and attend USC?

Students offered a wide variety of responses to this question, with the majority listing multiple reasons. (For coding purposes, a student’s first or primary response was counted.) Among the 87 responses, the most common was the availability of specific programs and/or majors (24 responses, or 28%). Within this category, six students specifically cited the School of Cinema-Television. Other schools and programs mentioned included Music, Business, Architecture, Journalism, and Gerontology.

Fifteen students (17%) cited the location of USC as the primary reason. Some of these students wanted to stay in southern California. Others came from other areas and specifically wanted to attend a school in this city. One student said, “I loved the idea of living in Los Angeles.”

Campus visits were cited as the primary reason for attending USC by 13 students (15%). One student said he fell in love with the campus on his first visit. Another said she had difficulty deciding between several schools and that the campus visit was the “deciding factor.”

Twelve students (14%) cited family ties as the primary reason for attending USC. One said he came from “a long line of Trojans” and that both of his parents and nine of his siblings have attended USC. Another said that her brother attended USC and reported having a “fabulous experience.”
The academic reputation of USC was mentioned as the primary factor by 10 students (12%). These students mentioned the overall reputation of USC, as opposed to the specific reputation of schools or programs.

Other response categories included financial aid/scholarships (7 responses), student diversity (4), and school spirit (2).

When combining the availability of specific programs and majors with the overall academic reputation of USC (34 total responses), it is clear that academic quality is important to students. Nevertheless, it is interesting the note that many students chose USC for specifically non-academic reasons, such as location, family ties, and campus visits.

Table 3. Reasons for Attending USC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of programs/majors</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Reputation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid / scholarship</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic programs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Areas of Interviewer Interest: Time Constraints and Limited Data

In the second section of the interview, interviewers had an opportunity to follow-up on topics pertinent to the specific interviewee that may yield valuable information. Interviewers could ask questions triggered by earlier student responses or questions the interviewer prepared head of time based on information about the students’ major, year, etc. In general, interviewers skipped this section. Some interviewers did this in the interest of time in an attempt to finish the process (interviewing and data entry) within an hour. Others explored their areas of interest within the context of other questions.

Still, there were some interesting responses in this section. One student who believed
that students admitted in spring were at a disadvantage suggested having spring-admitted students interact with existing students. Another student expressing the same complaint expressed frustration at not knowing exactly what to do during the fall semester prior to the spring admission.

One student reported not being ready for the reading load she was faced with as a freshman, that it was far more reading than she expected. A student in the Cinema-Television school believed that too much emphasis was placed on graduate students and not enough on undergraduates. One student reported being dissatisfied with the “narrow-minded, rich student” attitudes that some privileged students have. Finally, one student believed there should be more of an emphasis on ethical decision making.

**Student Affairs Strategic Plan Elements**

In order to understand students’ perceptions in context with elements of the Student Affairs’ strategic plan, several questions and discussion points addressed the following plan initiatives

I. Fostering an Intellectually Centered Student Culture

II. Preserving and Advancing the Unique USC Student Experience

III. Inventing the Future of Student Services

IV. Promoting Local and Global Citizenship

V. Creating a Culture of Evidence

Staff members generally addressed each of the five areas, although individual items within each Strategic Plan area were often skipped, primarily because of time constraints. For this reason, responses in this section were less complete.

The central mission of the University of Southern California is the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit. So far, in your experience at USC, what has most engaged, cultivated and
enriched your mind and spirit?

The responses to this question primarily dealt with specific academic opportunities or experiences and participation in university clubs and programs. Of the 68 students giving specific responses to this question, 37 (54%) specifically mentioned an academic experience, such as specific courses, programs, lectures, or events. For example, one student said, “Probably the most engaging thing for me was a General Education class I took called ‘Religion and Ethics.’ It was really an eye opener, in a good way.” One student cited “provocative discussion-based classes.” Another student reported being “constantly amazed that the faculty here are so active in their fields and that there are so many national and international experts.”

Nineteen students (28%) cited participation in clubs or programs as what has most engaged their mind and spirit. These include religious organizations, fraternities, and sororities, Study Abroad, Student Senate, Joint Educational Project (JEP), Daily Trojan, book salons, Trojan Band, music/theatre/dance programs, and travel opportunities. One student praised the ability to organize a new student organization on campus: “If you can’t find a club you want to join, make one of your own.” Another cited a program that uses theatre and acting to create community and deal with hardships. One student, active in the anti-sweat shop movement on campus, said that this participation has given him a “sense of global awareness,” though he added that he does not feel his specific group is supported by USC.

Six students (9%) mentioned specific relationships with other students or the community at large as being the most engaging. One student specifically cited the religious and cultural conversations he has had with his suitemates from other countries. An additional six students cited cultural performances and events as being most engaging, mentioning concerts, Annenberg speakers, plays, and dance performances.

What were your expectations of the academic/learning experience, and have they been met?

Almost all students had high expectations of academic rigor at USC, with the exception
of four students who said they had no expectations and one student who expected it to be a “party school.” For the most part, students’ high academic expectations have been met, according to 49 of 87 responders (56%). One student expected that the learning experience would be individualized and personalized—and this has been the case. Another cited an adjunct professor in Journalism as being “the highlight of my college experience.” One student said that classes have been more difficult than he expected—but that he welcomes the challenge and has taken advantage of faculty office hours.

An additional 28 students (32%) were mixed in their responses, indicating that their expectations were generally met, but with exceptions. For example, one student was very satisfied with her upper division English classes but very dissatisfied with her lower division classes. Another student expressed satisfaction with courses in his major and disappointment in his GE classes.

Ten students (11%) said that their expectations have not been met. One student said, “I thought it would be more challenging.” Another student said that the school had too much of a “professional focus” (i.e., emphasis on preparing students for jobs). One student said that his academic expectations were not always met and that many students did not seem care about learning.

Do you have intellectual conversations outside the classroom with other students, faculty, and staff?

Of the 87 students responding, 74 (85%) reported having intellectual conversations outside of the classroom. One Philosophy student said, “I have a lot of interaction with students and professors outside of class,” adding that the professors are “really good about making themselves available to you.” Another student reported having in-depth discussions about science during dinner with other students.

Eight students (11%) reported having conversations with other students but not with faculty and staff. Students did not necessarily hold faculty and staff responsible for this; usually
students were limited by a lack of time or initiative. Only three students reported not having any intellectual conversations outside of class.

**What do you consider to be unique about the USC student experience? Perhaps relative to what you hear from friends at other schools, or just in your perception?**

The Trojan Family, or a sense of campus “family” was students’ most common response regarding what makes the USC experience unique, cited by 14 students. One student said that USC was “like the mafia—we take care of our own.” Another said that the Trojan Family can be found nowhere else, adding, “I’m lucky to have the support of USC. It sets me aside from the rest.”

Eight students mentioned the unique school spirit, with one student calling USC “fanatical.” Another commented, “I know that I will be connected to these folks for years after I leave.” One student said she knows that her friends at other schools don’t enjoy their schools as much as she does.

USC’s location in Los Angeles was cited by eight students as a unique feature. One said that living in Los Angeles “affords a lot of opportunities, as an urban campus in such a large, important city.” Three students cited the international atmosphere at USC, in terms of faculty, students, and educational emphasis.

**What does the concept of "the Trojan Family" mean to you? Is it important to you?**

As discussed earlier, many students find the concept of the Trojan Family to be important and unique. Of the 74 responding students, 60 (81%) reported that the concept was important to them; 14 (19%) said that it was not. Many students mentioned the lifelong USC network and support system as defining the Trojan Family. Others cited the football team. One student said the concept is “…very important to me. It unifies us.” Another looked forward to graduating and helping out future Trojans. Another student stressed the national and international Trojan network, saying that it was not just limited to the Los Angeles area.

For those who said that the Trojan Family was unimportant, their reasons varied. Some
students simply said that the concept of the Trojan Family did not hold much meaning for them. One student found the concept “creepy and overdone.” Another said that the idea of the family once appealed to her but that she now sees it as representative of an “elitist attitude.”

**Overall, do you feel that the administrators and staff with whom you have interacted cared about and took an interest in you?**

In general, students were positive about the level of care and interest given them by USC administrators and staff. Of the 80 students responding to this question, 66 answered yes (83%) and six answered no (8%). The remaining eight (10%) had a mixed response.

Of the students responding positively, some offered more specific comments. One student mentioned having an “amazing experience” as an Orientation Advisor, thanks to staff members. Another student praised her academic advisors (in Occupational Therapy and Psychology). Two students praised faculty and staff in the History department. One praised staff in the Financial Aid office.

Of the students with negative or mixed feelings, three were unhappy with the financial aid office. Others felt that professors and administrators did not care about students, one saying that “administrators and staff are unhelpful and rude in nearly all cases” and another reporting that “a few professors didn’t care about their students at all.” Two students expressed frustration with their academic advisors’ lack of knowledge.

**What advice would you give to USC administrators on changes to improve the student experience?**

Responses to this question varied greatly, with few issues mentioned by more than a few students. One notable exception was housing, cited as an area that needs improvement by 10 students. Students mentioned difficulties with paperwork and an overall housing shortage. One student said, “there need to be more USC housing options off campus where you don’t have to share rooms with people. Also, there needs to be some way to guarantee housing.” Another student felt exploited by off-campus landlords and cited the need for more university-run housing.
One student acknowledged that housing and parking have always been issues and understood that the university was working to solve the problems.

Six students cited the need for professors and administrators to be more available to them, citing limited office hours and lack of approachability. Three students cited problems with DPS and campus safety in general. Other improvement suggestions included more services for transfer students, more tutoring, better athletic facilities, overall bureaucracy, and longer hours for different facilities. One student expressed frustration with ISD in general and multi-media problems in classrooms in particular. Another student emphasized that administrators should remember that many people here are transfer students and low-income students who may need special attention. Finally, two students believed there was too much emphasis on Greek life.

Unlike the first two questions discussed, academic issues were not at the forefront of students’ minds when presented with an open-ended prompt asking for improvement suggestions. Here, their responses ranged widely, with specific services and programs receiving much of the attention. Still, many students did address academic issues with this question (e.g., more office hours for professors, increased tutoring).

*What experiences outside of the classroom have you found engaging?*

Most non-classroom experiences fell into three categories: clubs/organizations/recreational activities (46 of 81 responding students); academic events (14); and cultural events (12). Within the first category, many students (14) mentioned fraternities or sororities as the most engaging experience. Others in this first category cited volunteer organizations, clubs, and athletic events. Specific examples include JEP, *Daily Trojan*, the Catholic Center, Student Senate, and club sports.

Those students who mentioned academic events talked about guest speakers and lecturers brought in by their respective schools and academic departments, as well as informal conversations with faculty. Students who mentioned cultural events talked about the cultural
opportunities in Los Angeles, as well as artists and musicians who have visited USC. Specific examples include visits to museums (such as the Getty), attending the Los Angeles Opera, and guest artists at Ground Zero.

*Do you feel you have been challenged at USC to get involved or make a difference in the local community and/or in the world at large?*

Of the 79 students who gave a specific answer to this question, 54 (68%) said yes. Six students specifically cited JEP as an example of getting involved in the community. Ten students mentioned other volunteer opportunities. One student said that “volunteering is something I always make time for” and that she “appreciates the diversity” of the surrounding community. Other students were generally positive about USC’s commitment to local and global citizenship but wished there was more of a campus-wide commitment, with one student saying that most of the emphasis on community involvement comes during the freshman year and that it should be extended to later years.

Fifteen students (19%) did not feel that they had been challenged to get involved in the local or global community. One student said “I’m not challenged by the university. I’m personally driven.” Another was disappointed at the lack of emphasis on volunteer work and community improvement. Three students reported being disappointed or disillusioned with their experiences with the Volunteer Center and/or JEP, with one stating that there was “no interest in finding a good match between my skills and interests and the needs within the community.”

Ten students (13%) gave mixed responses to this question, with half of these students reporting that global citizenship has been promoted but local citizenship has not. One student suggested a requirement for local community service, similar to a requirement mandated by his high school. Another student specifically stated that USC is disconnected to the local community but connected to the global community.

*Other than this conversation, have you had any other opportunity to evaluate your experience at USC and provide feedback?*
Most students reported they had not had other opportunities to provide feedback, other than classroom evaluations. Because this question was intended to address general (i.e., non-course specific) feedback, classroom evaluations were not counted as “yes” responses. Of the 82 students answering, 61 (74%) said they had not had other opportunities to provide feedback.

Several were appreciative of the opportunity offered by the Listening to Students interview. Of those who did mention classroom evaluations, some were skeptical of whether their feedback was ever taken into account.

The 21 remaining students (26%) reported having other opportunities to provide feedback. Eight of these students completed surveys (freshman survey, housing and food services surveys, etc.). Other students participated in surveys within their academic departments. Only two students reported participating in a focus group or interview.

**Final Questions: Program-Specific and Open-Ended**

*Did you participate in the on-line Alcohol.edu program? If so, what was your reaction?*

Alcohol.edu is a program designed to provide incoming freshmen with resources and information about alcohol. It is currently required of all new USC students, including freshmen and transfers. Of the 79 respondents to this question, 20 (25%) reported participating in the program. Most of these students were freshmen. Half of the participating students had positive reactions, such as, “It was long but useful” and “I was impressed; it was interesting.” The other half had negative reactions. One student thought the program “was a waste of time and hasn’t affected my decisions. It was a way to make USC feel better about themselves.” Another student said the program “didn’t address anything I didn’t already know.” One student believed the program was built on the assumption that all students drink and that it was not applicable to non-drinkers. The remaining 59 students (75%) did not participate in the program. In almost all cases, these students said it was not a requirement when they were freshmen.
Have you used the MyUSC student portal on the web? If so, what was your reaction?

MyUSC is a student web portal linking different USC web sites in a single location, requiring a single log-in. Additionally, it offers students the ability to customize pages and site content. Of 80 respondents, only 17 (21%) said they had used MyUSC. Among these students, 12 had a positive reaction. One student liked the fact that she only had to log in once and that everything was available from one site. Three students liked MyUSC but wished that it had more features. The remaining five students had a negative reaction to the portal, saying that they could find the same information elsewhere and that they “couldn’t think of a reason to use it again.”

The remaining students, 63 (79%) said that they had never used MyUSC. Many of these students had not heard of MyUSC. (MyUSC was first launched in 2004; many students would have already developed a pattern of use by accessing the MyUSC-linked applications directly.) One student was very impressed with the concept of the portal when it was explained to him but wished that someone had told him about it before.

Did you participate in an Orientation program when you first enrolled? If so, did you get the most important information and preparation?

All but one of the 90 responding students (99%) reported participating in an orientation program. Of the participating students, 63 (71%) had positive feedback and felt that they got important information and preparation. One reported that “the program was awesome” and that he “felt ready to be a Trojan.” Several appreciated the social aspects of the orientation and reported remaining friends with students they met during their sessions.

The remaining 26 (29%) were less satisfied, some (10) expressing ambivalence and others (16) overall dissatisfaction. One student was unhappy with the unavailability of the academic advisors. Others felt that the orientation needed more structure. A few students were overwhelmed by the amount of information and the speed at which it was presented. One student specifically suggested that Orientation Advisors “tone it down” and that the whole process left
her feeling more nervous.

Students attended a variety of orientations (on-campus, off-campus, transfer, etc.). Three students who attended out-of-state orientations (two in Chicago and one in Dallas) were disappointed that these sessions were no longer offered.

What is your perception as to your personal safety at USC and traveling to and from campus?

Responses here were very similar. Many students said that the campus and the area surrounding it are generally safe, as long as students take precautions, are careful, and make smart decisions. As expected, students felt safer on campus than in the area immediately outside of campus. Also, students felt safer during the day than at night, but appreciated the availability of Campus Cruiser. Overall, students expressed the need for using common sense and being aware of one’s surroundings.

Some students specifically reported being victims of crimes. One student mentioned that the Crime Alert emails make her feel less safe because they foster a sense of fear. Four students wanted a greater DPS and/or police presence in the areas around campus.

Limitations

Sample Size, Self-Selection, and Generalizability

Student interviewees served as a fairly representative cross-section of the USC experience, in terms of age, program of study, and opinion. Students were generally enthusiastic about participating in the Listening to Students project. Many interviewers reported that many students stayed longer than expected and gave thorough and informative answers to all of the questions they were asked. Some students were reluctant to talk about their USC experience, but most students seemed to feel comfortable opening up about themselves.

It is important to consider the impact of self-selection in considering the findings. Even
though respondents were part of a random sample of 4,000 students, given that the response rate was so low, the 102 participating students may be a unique group—both in terms of their initial decision to participate and their commitment to complete the interview. (63 students signed up for interview times but did not show for their appointments.) Finally, among the students who were interviewed, it is possible that the more talkative and passionate students are the ones whose thoughts are more likely to be recorded by the interviewer.

For these reasons, the findings from the Listening to Students report will have limited generalizability to the USC undergraduate student body at large.

**Open-Ended Questions, Few Standout Themes Among Findings**

Given the open-ended and rather vague nature of some of the questions, it is difficult to quantify many of the responses. Still, a compelling theme did arise from the interviews, specifically the prominence of the USC academic experience. When asked to name what they found most and least valuable about their experience, more students addressed specifically academic experiences and issues, as opposed to other types of experiences. Of course, given the university’s commitment to learning in all environments, educational experiences occur in wide-ranging contexts, which may contribute to this result.

When asked general, open-ended questions, students were primarily interested in relaying feedback about the varied learning opportunities available to them. Unless prompted, they usually did not talk about more practical issues, such as finances, registration, campus facilities, safety and parking. Instead, students opted to discuss their intellectual experience in the context of their specific academic programs and the vast array of non-classroom learning opportunities.

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

If the Listening to Students project continues, this set of 102 interviews may be considered an initial step. In order to increase the overall student response rate and to best make
use of the time committed by interviewers and students, the division may consider the following recommendations.

**Streamlined Interview Protocol**

As evidenced by the attached interview guidelines, the scripted interview questions were intentionally made non-specific and open-ended in order to foster the sense that students and staff members were engaged in informal “conversation.” However, students often gave the most illuminating and conversational answers to the more direct questions, such as, “What have you experienced that you value the most?” and “Do you feel that the administrators and staff with whom you have interacted cared about and took an interest in you?” Additionally, interviewers consistently reported that the interviews alone took approximately 60 minutes to conduct, with data entry requiring another 30 minutes of interviewers’ time. Using these estimates, interviewers who conducted the requisite 5 interviews per week would spend approximately 7.5 hours each week conducting and transcribing interviews, which is a significant demand on these individuals’ time, particularly considering that the majority of interviewers were directors or senior administrators in Student Affairs.

In order to streamline the process and shorten the time required to conduct the interview and enter the data, fewer and more direct questions may be asked. Further, eliminating the current Section II, *Exploration of Areas of Interest To Staff Member*, will help streamline the interview without sacrificing follow-up questions, as other opportunities exist for this.

The additional questions on Alcohol.edu, MyUSC, and orientation seem unnecessary and do not appear to yield new information. Other avenues already exist for this feedback (e.g., program-specific surveys, new student surveys, online usage tracking). Also, the section on questions specific to the strategic plan may be reduced by three to four questions. By making these changes, the overall interview time may be reduced to an average of 30 minutes, with 15 to 30 minutes required to enter the data. As a final step, staff members who participated in the first
series of interviews should be consulted for their input regarding ways to ensure the effectiveness of the interview program and protocols.

**Increased Student Participation**

In general, interviews result in greater depth of information than surveys and do not require a comparable response rate (approx. 30%) in evaluating the success of the research. However, the response rate for this project was low, making it difficult to extrapolate conclusions about the broader USC student experience. Efforts to increase student participation must go beyond a series of emailed messages sent to students who are already overloaded with contacts from professors, fellow students, and other university offices. Student Affairs directors could publicize the project to students with whom they work, encouraging them to participate in the interviews if they are chosen for the sample. (This would undoubtedly result in some students who were not selected as a part of the sample expressing interest in an interview. The research could accommodate these students’ input without adversely compromising the findings, acknowledging that the issue of self-selection already exists.) The division could take additional steps to publicize the program, via student events, publications, and contacts in academic offices. Finally, the effort to inform students about the Listening to Students initiative could begin during the fall semester and continue through the spring. Increasing the sample size will likely not achieve greater participation—the overall response rate needs to increase.

Finally, additional incentives may be given to increase student participation, although this will likely result in only a small increase. A key hurdle seems to be that students are reluctant to spend 30 to 60 minutes of their time talking to someone they may not know, for a project with which they are not familiar. By better publicizing the division’s efforts and spreading the word about the project, the response rate may increase. Also, emailed invitation and reminders may be worded in a way that makes the process appear more attractive and less intimidating.
Interviewer Commitment

Overall, the interviewers who participated in the project gave a great deal of their time, finding space in their busy schedules to meet with students. In addition to 102 completed interviews, 65 additional students did not show up for their appointments. (Note: Some of these 65 students rescheduled for other times and are among the sample of 102 students.) However, only 15 interviewers participated in the project. Given that 52 staff members were encouraged to participate, the overall level of interviewer commitment was disappointing. It could be that asking for five hours per week led to fewer staff members volunteering for the project. A smaller per-week commitment (2 to 3 hours) may increase staff members’ willingness to take part.

Final Analysis and Next Steps

Given that this initiative is named Listening to Students, it is important that the findings and information gleaned from the interviews be used in a way that facilitates students’ success and communicates that we value their feedback and consider their input in our work. Beginning with this report, we should undertake an effort to publicize the results. Results should be reported to Student Affairs groups and to university-wide committees. Patterns of student complaints (e.g., issues relating to housing addressed in the second question) should be acknowledged so students know their voice is being heard. Positive comments from students (e.g., USC’s high academic expectations are being met) should also be shared. By committing their time to in-depth, in-person conversations, the interviewees gave a lot of themselves. If their suggestions and opinions are taken seriously, students’ willingness to continue to participate in future Student Affairs research efforts may increase.

As discussed in this report, a great deal of valuable information relating to student opinion and experience was learned in the initial launch of the Listening to Students project. If desirable, future iterations of the research may yield a better response rate, more nuanced data, and findings that may be generalized to the broader USC student population by making some
modest changes to the methodology and research strategy.