Re-Imagining USC Annenberg:
A Converged Future in Communication and Journalism

I. Overview

Two central dynamics have guided our strategic visioning and planning consultations over the course of the last two plus years. Following a leadership change, the School’s stakeholders had an opportunity to re-assess priorities and to review the progress we had made collectively since the creation of the School in its present form. At the same time, the School faced a moment of remarkable turbulence and uncertainty in the external environment, providing both potential threats to our success but also new opportunities for expansion and growth.

In contrast to many of our peer institutions in higher education, we are in the unique position of being able to build from strength. The challenge remains to do so in a considered, strategic manner; to review alternative choices and to identify a path into the future that allows the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism to continue to serve the diversity of interests represented among the faculty, students, staff, alumni and other stakeholders while excelling in areas of comparative or unique advantage.

The strategic plan presented here will help distinguish the Annenberg School in an increasingly crowded environment of purveyors of ideas, education and training. It provides a roadmap for the compelling story we tell about who we are and what we aim to contribute in innovation and value to society as a whole. It will help us sustain our position in top rankings where already achieved, and help us define and enhance our performance in areas we deem essential to the future of the School, and of critical importance to society in the 21st century. It serves to spell out our unique features and core competencies that we need to provide to our students and our faculty through more focused incentives for faculty and staff performance, and more targeted resource allocation. Last, but not least, this plan will determine the priorities of the School and allocation of resources in terms of faculty and staff hires, project focus, the graduate and undergraduate students we admit and where they ultimately land, and the civility and quality of life in the building.

The logic of this document flows from the current environment of rapid, deep and widespread changes, including convergence in the core communication, journalism and media sectors; increasingly dense global networks; and heightened competition for scarce resources, faculty and top students. Like every other large institution, we are struggling to re-define our central mission in the modern world, and to decide how best to achieve that mission. As an educational institution, that means at a minimum re-thinking and focusing on three core elements – our teaching, our research and our service. At the same time, this is a living document. It will require continual monitoring and reevaluation to ensure that our strategic objectives remain relevant and in line with USC Annenberg School’s vision and position in the broader contexts in which we are embedded.
II. Our Values and Framing Principles

Walter Annenberg’s vision for the School remains as valid today as at the School’s founding nearly forty years ago:

“Every human advancement or reversal can be understood through communication. The right to free communication carries with it the responsibility to respect the dignity of others, and this must be recognized as irreversible. Educating students to communicate this message effectively and to be of service to all people is the enduring mission of this school.”

Collectively we have recognized a core set of principles that should inform how we realize that original vision to affect positive social change and to advance the frontiers of knowledge in today’s world and for the future. We value innovation, impact and internationalization as core drivers of what we do: i.e., the pursuit of highly sustainable innovative practices in teaching and research that enrich our own community and have broader impact on society from South Los Angeles to the world as a whole. We seek to transcend boundaries of discipline, race, ethnicity, gender, class and geography in and outside of the classroom through integration and convergence of our two academic schools, our many professional centers, and our community and industry-based partners.

Moreover we believe that our core strength in realizing these principles in our teaching and research derives from a deep commitment to risk-taking, to civic engagement and the public interest, and to a respect for diversity and inclusiveness. The core competencies our students acquire while at Annenberg, the research and advancements in the professions we choose to pursue and the way in which we serve our stakeholders and larger communities should reflect these values.

III. Vision & Mission

The USC Annenberg vision is to lead civil society, the media and entertainment industry through teaching, research and service. In this vision, USC Annenberg uniquely emphasizes and strives to

1) Be a uniquely comprehensive center of excellence of undergraduate, graduate and professional education in the converged study and practice of communication and journalism.

2) Place communication, digital and social media, and information in the public interest at the center of organizational and social change and civic engagement;

3) Innovate and create cutting-edge forms of communication and journalism through state-of-the art experimentation and facilities, experiential learning and applied research, and entrepreneurship;

4) Link up under one roof a highly networked, interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners from media, the hard and social sciences, business, humanities and the arts;
5) Exercise thought leadership through strategic partnerships with industry and community organizations locally, nationally, and internationally;

6) Promote core values of ethics, professionalism and a respect for diversity and inclusiveness in all its forms as central to communication and journalism;

7) Build on the unique strengths of our geographic location in Los Angeles as a gateway to one of the most diverse cities and the heart of entertainment in America, to Silicon Valley, and to the Pacific Rim

Our **mission** thus is as follows:

The USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism empowers the next generation of leaders and critical thinkers to innovate and take intellectual risks, to be entrepreneurial, to embrace civic engagement globally and locally, and to uphold the highest standards of ethics, inclusiveness, and professionalism. We aim to be comprehensive, interdisciplinary, integrating all fields of communication and journalism under one roof in a networked university in the most diverse and global city in America.

IV. Our Current Position

We are fortunate to occupy a special position in the field already because of our high visibility, long standing record of achievement, our resources and our location in LA and in USC. In addition to these strengths, we possess a history of innovation in teaching, thought leadership and programming. We also possess remarkable professional education and service in substantive excellence in key substantive areas; a strong national reputation as leaders in teaching AND research; and a strong and growing tradition of community outreach/public service with both students, faculty and center associates working closely with the local community, ethnic and indigent communities, and those committed to making all voices heard.

An environmental scan of 20 peer institutions confirms our relative uniqueness as only five of the schools surveyed are configured as we are with both communication and journalism combined under one roof. The School stands out for its explicit commitment to the converged practice of communication and journalism, to interdisciplinarity and collaboration, and its emphasis on entrepreneurship, innovation and networked approaches to knowledge. Other areas of uniqueness include some of the degree offerings. For example, USC Annenberg is one of only three schools in the country to offer an undergraduate and graduate degree in public relations, one of only two schools to offer an MA in Public Diplomacy, and the only school to offer an online concentration in its MA of Journalism degree. Our PhD in Communication remains ranked among the top programs. USC Annenberg also boasts more in-house journals and publications than any other comparable school.
Substantively USC Annenberg sets itself apart from its peers particularly in the areas of entertainment studies, health communication and journalism, network analysis, cultural communication, public diplomacy and public relations, and broadcasting among other topics.

There are, however, also clear opportunities for growth and strengthening relative to peer institutions, e.g., in all manner of international student programs and research, in sports communication/media, in economics, diversity, environmental and visual arts research, and investigative reporting. The area of digital media, gaming and technology has few if any competitors among communication and journalism programs but does not figure sufficiently prominently yet in peer comparisons – other than in professional education programs.

In addition to an environmental scan and international projects survey, we conducted an informal assessment of our strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (a SWOT analysis) through a series of focused group discussions with various stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrative staff, center staff, alumni, parents and the Board of Councillors. Common themes that emerged from these exercises included the general, but undefined, strength of the USC Annenberg brand, its dedication to professionalism, ethics, and quality across the board, good and “real-world” foundational skills, the individualized focus on students and their needs, the diversity of its offerings, faculty, research and applied programs, its openness to innovation, new ideas and experimentation, as well as the immersive, interdisciplinary nature of the School’s programs.

The School’s diverse networks in local and global communities, industry and government, its investments in social media and new technology, its leadership, current and potential, and its embeddedness within the University of Southern California and in Los Angeles are as yet under-tapped opportunities to further enhance the School in substance and reputation. The School’s location in Los Angeles at a private university with limited guaranteed financial resources is a double-edge sword, making experimentation and flexibility in education and research more possible, but at the same time creating some economic barriers to the attraction and retention of the very best faculty and students.

The uncertain future of the economy as a whole and the communication and journalism fields in particular clearly pose a certain challenge to the School’s future successes. Limitations in physical space, staff resources, time, as well as the relative lack of institutionalization (in favor of more ad hoc arrangements), common data and information, and the lack of broader evaluative “lessons learned” are among the factors deemed as areas of weakness or threat to any positive strides USC Annenberg makes.

This plan builds on earlier efforts to identify priority areas (cf. strategic planning efforts in 1999 and 2006) and core strategic initiatives of fostering communication in the public interest, leveraging the impact of new communication technologies, building on strengths in entertainment, communication and culture, and finally pursuing greater globalization.
Our current strategic roadmap also takes into account the University’s strategic objectives of meeting societal needs, an expanded global presence, and learner-centered education.

V. Strategic Priorities:
At the heart of USC Annenberg’s roadmap to the future are the following strategic goals. The USC Annenberg School’s strategic priorities are derived from our collective vision, mission and the data gathered from our internal and external stakeholders over the course the last two past years.

**Strategic Goal 1: Teach core values, skills and new competencies.**

While the USC Annenberg School should not turn away from the traditional verities of scholarship and practice in communication and journalism and all their sub-fields, we must also educate and train in new forms of adaptive leadership and collaborative research approaches that allow our students and faculty to capitalize on an increasingly networked, distributed information economy. They must be able to take risks and innovate and become more media literate/savvy and entrepreneurial. The School must balance traditional academic scholarship with practical, on the ground skills to remain relevant to key constituencies and communities.

**Strategic Goal 2: Create and sustain new knowledge**

The very essence of a higher educational and research institution is the imperative to create and sustain new knowledge. The challenge for USC Annenberg is to do so in a way that is truly interdisciplinary, innovative, impactful and that recognizes that knowledge creation is neither one-directional nor limited purely to the confines of the classroom or the “ivory tower”. It calls for experimentation and innovation in the topics of inquiry as well as the tools and methods used. USC Annenberg must do more than have an excellent command of the given tools of knowledge it must be able to translate effectively across communities of interest and across technologies.

**Strategic Goal 3: Build a state-of-the-art learning and research environment**

Goals 1 and 2 require a state-of-the art learning and research environment both in its physical aspects as well as through the pedagogic and research practices employed. The School must integrate and take advantage of cutting-edge technology, new methods, and the critical thinking tools that differentiates a world-class educational institution from the average. The School’s buildings, facilities, and technology must foster the highest quality of innovative and interdisciplinary practice and thought that is flexible and collaborative. It must provide an attractive venue for the generations of digital natives as well as being highly accessible to the communities that might benefit for the learning and research happening at USC Annenberg.

**Strategic Goal 4: Strengthen and position the ASCJ brand**

Complacency may be the School’s worst enemy. The particular challenge USC Annenberg School faces is improving on existing programmatic strengths and reputations for long term, sustained success and reputation. The USC Annenberg School seeks to be the world leader in the practice and study of the core fields represented under the Annenberg School roof. It already has many of the key building blocks in place, for example a world-class faculty and staff. Yet, in some industries and communities USC
Annenberg remains undervalued and perhaps relatively unknown. Moreover, in the information age, the pace of change is so rapid as to easily eclipse the gains made earlier. Thus the School must not only remain relevant to today’s society but in fact be a leader of tomorrow’s society.

**Strategic Goal 5: Foster integration & collaboration**

As noted above a unique feature of USC Annenberg is its comprehensiveness and rich diversity of programs. It is imperative for the brand and future success of the School to leverage the benefits of this richness, to create an educational and research institution that is indeed greater than the mere sum of its parts. To this end, USC Annenberg School strives to foster greater integration and collaboration, to create set of truly common experiences for students, faculty, staff and other stakeholders without losing the specific benefits that come from specialized learning and research.

**Strategic Goal 6: Expand innovative partnerships**

A hallmark of USC Annenberg is and will be its capacity to forge innovative partnerships of mutual benefit to the School’s stakeholder as well as our partners, whether other academic entities on this campus or elsewhere, local communities, policy makers and opinion shapers, industry and non-profit leaders. USC Annenberg seeks to reach new and non-traditional audiences whether through personal interventions or technology enhanced online learning and practice. Such partnerships must help to advance USC Annenberg’s core mission and its strategic goals.

**Strategic Goal 7: Enhance ASCJ’s position as an interdisciplinary and inclusive global knowledge hub**

Information as well as the benefits and problems that come with increased information know no national boundaries. In an era of internet-based social networks and rapidly evolving, increasingly mobile information communication technologies, USC Annenberg can and must reach out more aggressively to practitioners and scholars beyond the immediate confines of Los Angeles, of California or even the nation. Just as stronger sub-national local and hyperlocal drivers of social change that transcend national boundaries have emerged, so too must USC Annenberg become global even as it remains anchored in Los Angeles. USC Annenberg cannot excel in everything, but it can serve as a crucial connector or translator among the world’s repositories of knowledge, experience and best practices. This also means transcending traditional boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, age, and beliefs to ensure that USC Annenberg can benefit from and have impact on the widest possible range of civil society.

**VI. Implementation and Next Steps:**

The strategic goals are designed to build on existing strengths and propel the School to new heights of achievement and excellence while also addressing any critical gaps between current capacities and our aspirations. A main impetus for the strategic goals is to help the School navigate through the current dynamic environment but also to be prepared to answer the challenges and questions as yet unknown and to serve as a basis for choosing between competing demands, interests and opportunities. They aim to serve
as a “sieve” as the School must make resource allocation decisions, plan programs to maximize the School and University’s potential, and evaluate its progress over time.

For each strategic goal we will identify specific objectives and targets of opportunity that will be captured in a separate document. We have already begun to build a foundation for success through cross-school initiatives in media, economics and entrepreneurship, the Annenberg Innovation Lab, in entertainment studies, health communication and journalism, in sports media and international outreach efforts. A new name, the launch of a building re-imagining and fundraising effort, as well as prudent fiscal stewardship and key capital investments made over the course of the last four years place USC Annenberg in a strong position to successfully forge ahead with this roadmap.