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University of Southern California

Founded in Los Angeles, California in 1880, the University of Southern California (USC) is the oldest private research university in the Golden State. USC has approximately 18,000 full-time undergraduates enrolled in more than 130 majors. While California sends more students to USC than any other state, its residents make up less than half (43 percent) of the undergraduate student body. The university attracts the same percentage from other US states; the balance comes from other countries. Just over 30 percent of all undergraduates are either African American or Hispanic.

USC is an extremely selective university. Just under 17 percent of the students who applied to join last year's freshman class were offered admission, about the same percentage for that were accepted for admission to crosstown neighbor UCLA. The average GPA was 3.7 while SAT scores ranged from 1270 to 1500 for the middle fifty percent of the class. The average leans toward 1400.

USC is unique among peer private institutions in that there is neither Early Decision nor Early Action. Everyone must get their application in by December 1st to be considered for merit scholarships; the deadline for regular decision for those who are not applying for merit-based awards is January 15th. Some majors, especially in the visual and performing arts, will have additional requirements. One other difference: USC offers "second-choice" admissions by major; those who are not admitted to one of the more selective academic programs may still be admitted to the university.

Ninety-six percent of the class that entered on 2015 returned for their sophomore year, excellent for any college, regardless of size while 75 percent of the students who entered in 2010 finished within four years, also excellent. Since USC is also a "spirit and sports" school, it is also fair to consider the graduation rates of its athletes. In late 2016, [the university reported that 83 percent of its varsity athletes graduated within six years](#), including sports such as football or basketball where players are "red-shirted" and given a fifth year of eligibility in their sport and baseball where athletes who are drafted by major league teams may leave after their junior year. [The football program's graduation rate was 67 percent although seven other sports, six being women's teams, had graduation rates that exceeded 90 percent.](#)

USC is the largest independent (non-religious) university that plays football in a "Power 5" sports conference. The university's success at the sport gives it a higher national profile than many schools, public and private, that offer similar academic options. Syracuse University is probably the most similar school in terms of academic mix and participation in intercollegiate athletics, but it is far less selective. Boston University, Northeastern University and New York University are more comparable schools for selectivity. If there was an aspirational urban university to compare to USC for academic offerings, it would probably be the University of Pennsylvania.



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Costs

The bad news is that USC is incredibly expensive. Direct charges for tuition and fees, room and board for 2016-17 approached \$67,000. Depending on where a student resides, the total cost of attendance can approach \$75,000. More bad news: the university awards only about 1,200 merit-based scholarships, [although the largest awards are quite generous.](#)

But there's also good news: the university commits to meeting 100 percent of demonstrated need and graduates its students with a reasonable level of debt for a selective private school. The average indebtedness for students who graduated in 2015 was just under \$28,000—the Federal Direct Student Loan Program allows students to borrow a maximum of \$27,000—and 57 percent of the class had no debt at all. Only five percent of the class had to borrow from a source other than the Federal Government.

Curriculum

With the exception of agriculture, USC offers practically any major that could be offered at a large urban private university. The Film programs are going to be exceptionally selective—the admit rate for the BFA in Film and Television Production is four percent—and the same will be true for programs in Architecture and Theatre.

What sets USC apart from similar private universities is that [virtually every major can also be a minor.](#) There are also [“mini-majors”](#) as well as [interdisciplinary minors](#) and [special topic minors.](#) However, USC also has multiple undergraduate schools. While it can be easy to carry a major or sometimes two majors in one school, or a major with one or two minors in another school, double majors involving two schools will require more time towards a degree. Also, unlike crosstown neighbor UCLA, and other schools in the University of California system, there are no “impacted” or “limited enrollment” majors at USC.

Since USC is a fairly large undergraduate school incoming freshmen should expect to have some large classes. However, over 60 percent of all undergraduate courses at USC offered in 2015-16 had fewer than 20 students while 11 percent had more than 50. By comparison, 51 percent of UCLA classes had fewer than 20 students; more than a fifth (22 percent) had over 50.

USC students gave their faculty a rating of 3.75 (out of a possible 5) on [RateMyProfessors.com](#), about the same rating that UCLA and NYU students (3.73) gave their faculty but slightly higher than Boston University (3.70) students rated theirs. USC students also held their faculty in significantly higher regard than Northeastern University students (3.58) and Syracuse University students (3.68).



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Community

USC admissions staff say that: “It’s always a perfect day in LA.” That’s appropriate to the weather as well as the older and newer buildings on campus; there’s a movie set feel to the place as you walk through the academic center towards the Los Angeles Coliseum. In fact, [the campus has been a movie venue since 1930.](#)

The university is served by light rail transit into downtown Los Angeles. That makes a car less necessary than ever for a USC student. The USC campus has every cultural amenity a college student could possibly want. The community easily attracts prominent speakers and entertainers to visit. The downside is that the neighborhood gets rough within three blocks of any direction from the campus.

USC may be one of the few universities that places its athletic symbols in the academic center of the campus but that is also part of its charms in bonding a community of students and alumni. The Coliseum is one of the few American athletic facilities that is also on the National Register of Historic Places. Opened in 1932 to host the Olympic Games, it has also been home to a second Olympics (1984), the World Series and the very first Super Bowl in 1967. The Los Angeles Rams returned to the venue last season, making USC the only US college campus to host college and professional football.

Football is USC’s national face to most non-academic audiences, although USC athletes have won more Olympic medals than competitors from any other university in the US as well as more than 100 national championships in team sports. The Trojans have won 11 national championships in football and appeared in the Rose Bowl 34 times, more than any other college team and won it more times (25), too. No school has won more national championships (12) in college baseball, although the last one came 18 years ago. But USC’s greatest athletic successes have come in track and field; the men’s and women’s teams have won 27 national championships.

It’s not necessary to be a football fan to have an enjoyable experience at USC. There’s plenty for college students to do in Los Angeles if you don’t care about sports, especially for those who enjoy the performing and visual arts. But because the football program has been so successful, it is a more important part of the campus culture than it would be at any similar private university, or even UCLA or Berkeley.

Comforts

Like most urban universities, USC has not housed the majority of its students on campus in residence halls or apartments, nor does the school require incoming freshman to live on campus. Currently, less than 40 percent of the undergraduate population lives in university-owned housing. [First-year students have a selection of 12 halls, residential](#)



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[colleges or suites](#). Next year, the school will open USC Village across from the campus, a residential center that will have another 2,500 beds. [USC also maintains its own listings for off-campus housing, which can get pricy. Seventeen fraternities and ten sororities have their own chapter houses near campus along a true Greek row.](#) This is one school where students might want to consider Greek organizations given the high costs of off campus housing in Los Angeles and the spirit and sports culture of the campus community. Social fraternities current attract just over a quarter of the men while sororities draw just under a quarter of the women.

Connections

USC makes it very easy to make connections, with a [central career development center](#) as well as offices based at individual schools, all of which actively engage alumni as well as employers. Among the nearly 250,000 alumni registered in [LinkedIn.com](#), more than 111,000 live and/or work around Los Angeles. Outside of California there are more than 8,600 alumni based in/around New York City, over 5,400 in/around Washington DC and more than 4,900 in/around Seattle.

USC alumni are very loyal. According to **US News**, USC has the fifth-highest alumni giving rate (39 percent) in the country among large and mid-sized research universities, higher than Cornell or Penn, the most similar Ivy League schools in terms of student body size and academic options. Only Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Notre Dame alumni are more loyal to their alma mater.

Conclusion

USC is one of the leading research universities in the country and it has one of the best connected alumni bases in the world. But it is not for everyone. Los Angeles is a less mobile community than Boston or New York. The neighborhood around the USC campus is far from the best compared with similar urban universities, especially UCLA or NYU. USC is also more of a spirit and sports oriented school than any of its private urban peers, though that has its charms for very bright people who also want that experience.

If you do not come from California, but want to enjoy perfect days in LA, USC is likely to be a better value over UCLA, Pepperdine or Loyola Marymount, provided that you can get in. If you come from California and have the means or a scholarship to come to USC versus UCLA or Berkeley, you might want to consider becoming a Trojan. You will have less worry when it comes to getting into the major and classes that you want—and you'll connect with a vast alumni network.



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Report Card: University of Southern California

- Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: A
- Freshman Retention: A
- Costs: B+
- Curriculum: A
- Community: B+
- Comforts: B+
- Connections: A