MEMORANDUM

To: Academic Deans, Faculty, and Staff
From: Elizabeth Garrett, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Date: September 4, 2012
Subject: Streamlining Academic Processes

Our new Strategic Vision announces: “Now is the time to be more creative in our research and teaching, more entrepreneurial in our evolution, more generous-minded in our points of view and outreach, more committed to the role of the university, ancient and new, to gather into classrooms and laboratories, libraries and studios, locally and across the globe.” To achieve our ambitions, we must be nimble and flexible, and to embody those qualities, we must rigorously review our academic processes to ensure that they further our values in the most efficient and least burdensome ways possible.

Faculty time is valuable, and I believe your energy should be spent pursuing excellence in research and teaching rather than navigating bureaucracies. While there is always some amount of time that should appropriately be devoted to governance and compliance, we all have a responsibility to periodically examine our practices and address unneeded complexity.

Accordingly, over the last year, I asked the leaders of units reporting to me to streamline academic processes and reduce unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy. I am pleased to report the following accomplishments:

- The Graduate School has reduced the guidelines for thesis/dissertation submission from 57 pages to only six. The number of steps that comprise this process has been cut in half. The petition and request system in the Graduate School went online in April. Beginning this fall, enrollment in the student health insurance program for Ph.D. students will be automatic when they register for courses.

- The Office of Faculty Affairs has approved a proposal by the Dornsife College with respect to the annual merit reviews so that submitting a current CV and one-page supplemental narrative is sufficient. Also, joint appointments within a school no longer require approval of the Provost, and funds provided by the Provost’s office no longer will be counted as part of the $5,000 annual threshold for funds needing prior approval from Faculty Affairs. In addition, several documents and forms can now be submitted online, including mini-dossiers for assistant professors and clinical faculty, requests for emeritus/a appointments, sabbatical and leave requests, joint appointments checklists, and dossier recommendation forms.
• Enrollment Services has eliminated 90% of paper financial aid forms and 80% of academic petitions handled in the Registrar’s Office.

• The Office of Research has spearheaded a series of initiatives to make paperwork more comprehensible and manageable. Susan Rose, the director of the USC Office for the Protection of Research Subjects, is the national leader for the “flex coalition” of more than 30 universities. The flex coalition is reducing the burden on investigators for non-federal low-risk studies, eliminating annual reviews and reducing the amount of information that investigators need to provide for approval. This has significantly reduced the time requirements for investigators on several hundred studies over the last year.

• There has also been continued progress toward the deployment of the Total Access for Research Administration software. Investigators will find it much simpler to manage accounts, forecast expenditures, create and change budgets, submit protocols, and monitor the status of negotiations and agreements. Specific near-term improvements will include integrated single-statement billing for core laboratories, online submission of protocols for laboratory safety, animal research, and conflicts of interest, and a financial projection system for managing accounts.

• The USC Stevens Center for Innovation is making changes to improve service to faculty, including an increased focus on direct faculty support. These efforts include streamlining the approval of intellectual property (IP) terms in sponsored agreements and empowering the Department of Contracts and Grants to complete IP negotiations in a broader set of cases. The Department of Contracts and Grants has completed a reorganization with the goal of improving service and employee retention.

• Through the efforts of Information Technology Services (ITS), the Blackboard course creation process has become automated, eliminating the chore for faculty and staff of manually creating 4,000 courses per semester and making websites available months earlier. Similarly, ITS automated the feed from its Telecom Management System, reducing staff time spent entering information on the financial system and retiring a paper-based process in Accounts Payable.

I commend the individuals and units responsible for these improvements, but our charge is ongoing. The Office of the Provost will continue to review processes to reduce the burden on faculty and students as much as possible and to maintain flexibility, accountability, and transparency. We anticipate that changes in procurement processes and new software systems that will be implemented over the next few years will provide opportunities for new efficiencies throughout the university. We will also work with the Academic Senate on these issues. I have encouraged all schools to adopt similar assessments of their own processes, to implement improvements, and to share with me suggestions for university-wide reforms. Your ideas with respect to process improvements are welcome. Please direct your suggestions to Derek Lazzaro in my office via strategic@usc.edu.

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