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## USC Provost C.L. 'Max' Nikias to succeed Steven Sample as president

**Nikias, the second in command, will become the university's 11th president in August.**

By Larry Gordon

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C. L. "Max" Nikias, USC's provost and second-in-command, will become its next president, succeeding Steven B. Sample on Aug. 3 at the helm of the 34,000-student university, school officials announced Thursday.

Nikias, a Cypriot-born electrical engineer with expertise in radar and sonar, was long mentioned as the leading candidate to become USC's 11th president, so much so that some trustees reportedly argued against conducting a national search. But the board went ahead, considering 75 other educators before returning to a man well-known and well-liked on campus.

A former dean of USC's school of engineering, Nikias, 57, said Thursday that he hopes to build on Sample's accomplishments, by intensifying fundraising efforts. He plans to announce, early on, a major campaign aimed at doubling USC's endowment in the next 10 years.

"It's not a change of direction but an acceleration," he said in an interview. "This university is on the ascent under President Sample for 19 years. We can move the needle and move this university into what I call the pantheon of undisputed elite universities." Among other goals, he said, was improving the academic standings of USC's medical school and hospitals.

He also said he plans to strengthen USC's already extensive ties to Asian nations and colleges, beyond the large number of Indian and Chinese graduate students the university enrolls. "Our vision is that we want USC to become the university of the Pacific Century, the intellectual and cultural center of this world tied to the Pacific Century," Nikias said, his Greek-Cypriot accent still strong.

USC Board Chairman Edward P. Roski Jr. described Nikias as "a remarkable and inspiring leader, a brilliant scholar and the best possible person to lead our university forward."

But the campus' new leader will have big shoes to fill. Sample has been president for 19 years, a

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longevity rare in American academia, and he boosted the university's academic prestige and financial resources significantly. Since 1991, USC has risen from 51st to 26th place in U.S. News & World Report's rankings of national research universities.

USC's endowment also increased dramatically, to a pre-recession peak of \$4 billion, but then fell to about \$3 billion, relatively small for such a large research university. And, in difficulties likely to be inherited by his successor, Sample's recent tenure was troubled by NCAA investigations into allegations of improper gifts to USC athletes and whether the university lost "institutional control" over its athletics program.

Nikias said he could not comment on the investigations, but plans to keep USC sports programs strong. "I love Trojan athletics. . . . And I believe the athletic spirit of this university is the glue that holds the Trojan family together."

Nikias holds co-authorship to eight patents, mainly in digital signal processing for radar and sonar communications used by the U.S. Navy. A U.S. citizen since 1988, he joined USC's faculty in 1991 and was engineering school dean from 2001 to 2005, during which time he helped garner more than \$200 million in donations.

Named provost in 2005, Nikias handled many sensitive issues. He negotiated USC's \$275 million purchase last year of the University Hospital and Norris Cancer Center from Tenet Healthcare Corp. after years of disputes over control. Officials said he was instrumental in USC becoming home to the Shoah Foundation, the archive of Holocaust survivors' testimony established by filmmaker and USC trustee Steven Spielberg.

He also boosted arts and humanities programs and interdisciplinary work among the campus' engineers, musicians and film experts.

Education experts noted Thursday that universities, unlike businesses, typically do not establish succession plans and often hire outsiders after extensive searches. USC, known for its businesslike ways, clearly did not want a lengthy public competition and Sample was said to be a strong Nikias advocate.

Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education and former head of the University of North Carolina, said she was pleased USC had hired a well-prepared insider. The university, she said, "will benefit from the continuity and from long-term leadership devoted to the same values and strategic goals."

USC education professor William G. Tierney, who heads the school's Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, said the selection was well received on campus because of Nikias' personal popularity and also because it promises a relatively seamless transition.

"I think if we had hired someone who didn't know the institution, trying to learn who the key players are, getting to know the city, would take an enormous amount of time. This fellow knows everyone on a first name basis -- faculty, community leaders and trustees," Tierney said

Holden Slusher, USC's undergraduate student government president, called Nikias "a down to earth guy." Students are happy to have a new president who "knows exactly what we do here and is not going to revolutionize something we love," Slusher said.

Even if many on campus saw Nikias as a sure thing, trustees hired a national search firm and chose

him from among seven finalists, all sitting presidents or provosts at major universities. Officials declined to identify the others or to release Nikias' new salary.

Nikias said Thursday that he never assumed he would get the job and prepared for months for his 90-minute interview with the trustees. "One thing I learned in my career is that you never, never take anything for granted," he said.

After earning his undergraduate degree in Greece, Nikias received his master's and doctorate degrees from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Coincidentally, Sample became president of SUNY Buffalo as Nikias and his wife were finishing their studies there, although the two future USC leaders did not meet.

"It wasn't even in our wildest dreams that the president who would sign our diplomas would be the president for our two daughters at USC and that one day I would be his successor," said Nikias, whose daughters both attend USC, one in law school and the other as an undergraduate.

He and his wife, Niki, live in Palos Verdes, which reminds them, he said, of a Greek island. They will move later this year to USC's presidential residence in San Marino.

Sample, who is 69 and has Parkinson's disease, announced in November that he would retire this summer. On Thursday, he released a statement praising Nikias and saying: "USC will be in excellent hands with Max as president."

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