DATE: July 16, 2019

TO: Office of Research Senior Staff and Chairs

FROM: Randolph Hall

RE: My Step-Down on December 31
For Distribution to Office of Research Staff

I am writing to let you know about a transition I have chosen, to step down from the position of Vice President of Research, effective December 31, take a sabbatical, and return to the faculty of the Epstein Department of Industrial and System Engineering. There are many reasons for my decision. You will get a sense of my thinking by reading below.

When I arrived in 1993, USC was a different place. Admission to our undergraduate programs was not nearly as selective as it is today; the neighborhood (and the city as a whole) was much more dangerous, just one year after the widespread unrest surrounding the Rodney King verdicts; and our research programs were less mature.

You might say that I came to USC on speculation. What we lacked in reputation, we made up in vision and ambition. I admired the university’s values of risk taking, experimentation, a spirit of cooperation, and commitment to community. More so, USC’s mission to elevate quality and impact drove the university toward excellence. Unlike my prior university, USC was a place that lacked a sense of entitlement, as we had to work tirelessly to elevate the institution, and had to compete for nearly all of our resources.

As a faculty member, USC provided a supportive environment for my research and teaching, as well as opportunities to move into leadership positions, as director for two research centers, department chair and research dean. I have been particularly fortunate to serve as vice president (and vice provost) of research for the last 14 years.

Like many leadership positions in academia, the VP of Research job blends periods of stress coupled with the routine, as well as joy, which for me arose from USC’s creative accomplishments in research. While the job provides continuous opportunity to improve the culture for research through impact, innovation and ethics, the pleasure comes from those moments of joy that counter balance other parts of the job that are essential, but not nearly so rewarding. USC has been joyful for me as a place that protects academic values, catalyzes collaborative research, achieves high standards that protect research subjects, innovates in the practices of research and models of scholarship; and for how it has risen in stature.

USC is also a place where a very small minority have used their positions of privilege to advance self-interest at the expense of the institution, and at the expense of our commitment to serve
the public. This small minority have consumed an expanding portion of my time, and an even
greater portion of my energy. That is where the joys of the position fade.

Despite the challenges, we in the Office of Research should be proud of our organization and
accomplishments. First, our research excellence follows from our commitment to basic values:
fairness for all, consistent processes, open communication, honesty, evidence-based decisions
and accountability. We are also an organization that respects the great talents that each of us
contributes to research at USC, no matter our position or background, so that the views of the
highest positioned individuals do not subsume those of others. I feel blessed that we as an
organization do not sacrifice our values based on status or influence.

I wish now to turn to a more personal note. About seven years ago, it was my honor to serve
on a jury in the LA County Courts. And I do mean honor. Through my service as member and
foreman, I gained great respect for the power of the American justice system, and the ability of
ordinary people, coming from varied backgrounds, to make life-altering decisions (in this case,
whether or not to convict two men of first degree murder, with special circumstances).

If I were called to serve on that trial today I would gladly do it again, though I doubt I would be
chosen, for how I would answer one question posed to prospective jurors: do I know a murder
victim. My answer then was no. My answer today would be yes, not one but two: one a USC
faculty member, whom I had spoken with hours before his death, the second, a former
employee (someone I recruited to USC), who later moved on to work for the County of San
Bernardino. He became a random victim of a mass workplace shooting, a shooting that played
prominently in the 2016 presidential election.

Life and death events outweigh all others, and place the details of our day-to-day lives in
perspective. With this in mind, I have chosen to refocus my priorities on the things that bring
the greatest meaning: on a personal level, family and friends, the outdoors, and all forms of art.
Professionally, during sabbatical, my focus will be on innovation in higher education broadly
(not just USC), and specifically how universities can overcome tradition to align education,
research and clinical care to better serve society.

From now through my step-down in December, my priority will be to facilitate a smooth
transition to new USC research leadership, to be chosen by others. I will also work with you to
continue execution on our strategic plans.

Though it is normal for such transitions to create anxiety, my advice to you and your staff is to
be receptive to change, for it may strengthen the university and your jobs. In the process,
though, please stay true to the values and standards that made the Office of Research a
success.

You may wonder the outcome of my jury service. We deliberated for a day, weighed conflicting
evidence as well as strange testimony from officers and friends of the victim, and came to the
only conclusion that made sense: a hung jury. Our choices are not always obvious and clear,
and we may not always agree. But when we disagree, we should stay true to the process and we should respect each other. Even a hung jury can bring strength, as ours did.

Thank you for your hard work and devotion to the cause of research excellence, innovation and ethics. I am grateful to the leadership and strength of the Office of Research staff, and am confident in your continuing success.