

# Counselor News

*Quarterly Updates for Guidance Counselors* Spring 2006

## *Beyond General Education – The Thematic Option Honors Program at USC*



*Begun in 1975 and often cited as one of the country's best undergraduate honors programs, Thematic Option got its name from its focus on studying broad themes that cut across multiple disciplines. Every year, just under 200 freshmen participate in "T.O." Dr. Robin Romans, assistant dean in the USC College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, sat down with Counselor News to share his thoughts about the program.*

### **How long have you been involved with the Thematic Option program and what drew you to it?**

I first started working with it in 1991. I've been Director of the program since 1999. I also teach political theory courses in USC's Political Science Department. I've enjoyed teaching undergraduates about political theory and ideology by drawing on a combination of approaches in fields such as political science, philosophy, women's studies, literature, and history. So, you could say that the interdisciplinary approach used in Thematic Option fits perfectly with my own way of thinking.

### **What kinds of faculty members tend to teach in the program?**

Faculty that truly enjoy teaching first and second year undergraduates who are just starting to map out their own academic interests. It's a magical time of discovery for students and this makes them fun to teach. Professors are drawn to our program because they teach across disciplines and this approach gives them a chance to cover material in a new way.

### **What kind of student is attracted to Thematic Option?**

Our students are eager to explore ideas and want to be challenged academically. They welcome chances to talk about ideas outside the classroom and we encourage this through regular extracurricular activities, including annual fall round-table symposiums, a spring research conference, and various field trips. Our students come from all over the country, with 56 percent coming from outside of California.

### **How do students apply for the program?**

We invite certain students to apply after they are admitted to USC. We work closely with the Office of Admission to identify freshmen admitted to USC who would be eager to participate in our intensive courses. As a rule, these young people are entering college with excellent academic preparation and demonstrated ability. The average SAT for this last year's entering freshmen in Thematic Option was 1479, and they had a mean high school GPA of 4.24. Within a week of the USC admission notice, we send a letter inviting students to complete a simple application to indicate their interest.

### **What makes the academic program in Thematic Option distinctive compared to other universities?**

Teaching a subject in a cross-disciplinary way requires students to read more widely and deeply. This means giving our students an extensive reading list and requiring that they devote considerable time to class preparation. Also, the writing curriculum is very intensive and individualized. The writing classes include bi-weekly, one-on-one tutorials between students and teachers. The students who participate in Thematic Option are outstanding and will become better writers during their college years. Our goal is to make them better, more sophisticated writers sooner; to get them to the junior/senior level after just one year of college.

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Spring is a great time to visit USC.

There's lots going on, from free concerts, lectures and exhibits to all the spring sports – tennis, baseball, basketball, track, water polo, diving, volleyball and much more! Check the Calendar of Events at [www.usc.edu](http://www.usc.edu).

Come anytime, but remember that our students will be gone for Spring Break from March 13-18.

We are now in the process of carefully reviewing...

**34,000**

freshman applications, received from what looks like a bumper crop of great students!

## The Thematic Option Honors Program *continued*

**Since USC is a combination of liberal arts and professional schools, is the Thematic Option program more likely to attract liberal arts or professional majors?**

I'm glad you asked, because the answer will really bring out the breadth of the participants' interests. Thematic Option has 196 freshmen and sophomores. Each core class they take contains 15 to 40 students whose interests can range from pre-med to philosophy and from history to engineering. The percentages really tell the story. Almost 13 percent of our class is in humanities, 14 percent are in the natural sciences, and 19 percent are in the social sciences; those are all the liberal arts people. But 12 percent of our students are in Cinema-Television or the Annenberg School for Communications, and 13 percent are in Engineering or Business. The remaining 29 percent are still deciding what field they'll pursue and are interested in building a solid liberal arts foundation.

**What about students whose emphasis will be in the sciences – pre-med or engineering majors? Is there enough room in their schedules for them to be part of the Honors program?**

Yes, because the Thematic Option satisfies USC's general education core requirements that all students must complete, we have a steady representation of future physicians and engineers.

**You mentioned core courses—what are these exactly?**

There are four courses, each with different themes. "Culture and Values" focuses on human identity and values in historical perspective through careful analysis of great literary and philosophic texts; "Change and the Future," examines the effects of industrialization on social relations and ideology in the modern age; "Symbols and Conceptual Systems," considers our fascination with human beings as meaning-seekers and symbol-makers and examines theories of interpretation; and "Process of Change in Science," deals with the nature of scientific inquiry and paradigm shift, questioning the role of science as the dominant mode of knowledge in the modern age. We value these courses because they embody the interdisciplinary nature of our program. In addition, we require two intensive writing seminars.

**You said that there were field trips in the program. What kinds of field trips are those?**

At the beginning of each year, we go up to Griffith Park or the Getty Center to get an overview of the whole Los Angeles basin. These trips are important to give our students, the majority of whom come from other states, a sense of just where the campus is situated. And part of our message is that the whole metropolitan area is their learning opportunity. Their encounters and conversations outside the campus enrich what they can bring back to their classroom discussions and personal academic pursuits.

**Tell me about the Resident Honors Program. Is this linked to Thematic Option?**

Yes, but it is also a bit different. Every year we accept a limited number of students who are ready to start college after completing their junior year in high school. These students come to USC for an intensive summer program to finish their senior year requirements and then are enrolled in the incoming freshmen class. These are exceptional students who have taken full advantage of the academic opportunities at their high schools and performed extremely well scholastically in honors and AP or IB courses. Resident Honors Program students are ready to move to the next level, so the intensive curriculum in Thematic Option is a good fit for them.

**Are there any other such honors programs at other universities? How are they different and how are they the same?**

While we don't directly compare what we do here, there are various models of honors humanities programs at highly selective universities around the country. We believe that our program attracts the kind of students who are looking for a small liberal arts college experience within the larger community offered by a major research university.

A few words of wisdom for students about to make big decisions:

*"Wherever you go, go with all your heart."*

*"Your life expands or contracts*

*according to your courage."*

### To find out more

about the Thematic Option Program, please visit:  
[http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general\\_studies/TO/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general_studies/TO/)

To find out more about the Resident Honors Program, please visit:  
[http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general\\_studies/RHP/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/general_studies/RHP/)

## A Word from Our Students: *Pursuing a thematic approach to education*

**What if you could turn something mundane, like fulfilling general education requirements, into a rigorous, even transformational educational experience? That's the goal of the Thematic Option program. Academically outstanding incoming USC students are invited to become part of the program. What's it really like – and what's their advice to high school students? We talked to several T.O. students to find out.**

**Maren Jinnett, Sophomore, from New York City, majoring in Creative Writing, Trustee Scholar**  
**My family has a strong legacy at Harvard, and my high school really pushed the Ivy League. USC was by far the largest school to which I applied, and having an honors option was definitely a factor.** When I came for my scholarship interview, I loved my meeting with the Thematic Option faculty – they put 12 books in front of me and asked me to talk about them. The questions they asked really made me think – it was clearly more about being holistic, passionate and a well rounded human being than about your GPA. The faculty is unbelievably strong, and I take classes from published authors and playwrights. My T.O. classes have kids from lots of different states and different countries, all as interested as I am in being challenged. We get incredible advisors who really want us to succeed, and help in many areas beyond academics. It's a challenge to come here from the East Coast – you have to learn to look at the world differently. But what I've found here is not an ivory tower - you are actively involved in the world. USC is a school that pushes the envelope and pioneers new approaches to learning that combine breadth with depth.

LA is a progressive city and USC is a progressive institution – the opportunities are vast, especially for T.O. students. Looking back, I didn't really know what I was getting into, but I'm glad I trusted my instincts. My whole family is thrilled and I've found it's a great place to be. What kind of kids are in T.O.? My friends work harder than anyone I know – they are people looking to create their own experience.

**Dillon Buckner, Sophomore, from Santa Rosa, California, majoring in psychology, Presidential Scholar**

**I took the hardest classes I could find in high school and got into almost all the schools I applied to, but USC had the best combination of financial aid and small class size.** I hadn't heard of Thematic Option, and when I got the application, I was a bit skeptical about how different general education classes really could be. I considered myself a pretty good writer, but my first T.O. class was a humbling experience! I've found that T.O. classes really are very different types of classes – they're all about discussion, they expose you to ideas and teach you how to think. It's also easier to make friends in T.O. classes, with as few as a dozen students and lots of interaction. I find that the people in my T.O. classes are those I enjoy the most – they're the ones I can sit down with and talk about esoteric things. Most start out living in the Dean's halls, and one of my best memories is the night we literally stayed up all night talking about free will. I was successful in high school without having to work too hard. But what I have learned, and my advice to other students, is to not just slide

by. Put in more work, and more effort, and build the study habits you need to succeed in college.

**Ahmed Darwish, Senior, from Bellevue, New Jersey, majoring in industrial systems and engineering, Dean's Scholar – Resident Honors Program**

**Thematic Option has been a phenomenal experience for me especially because I skipped my senior year in high school. USC invited me to apply for their Resident Honors Program –** which allowed me to complete my high school senior year requirements at USC during the summer, then enroll in Fall. Resident Honors students also participate in Thematic Option, and it was good to know I would be part of a smaller core group of students. It has definitely been a lasting bond – I have stayed in touch with my T.O. friends and professors throughout my four years at USC, and it's been a great way to stay connected with people in other majors. The program was everything I hoped for and more – they take top professors, have them teach small classes with students who are deeply interested in learning, in formats that are multifaceted, challenging and engaging. As an engineering student, I was at a definite disadvantage at first since everyone else seemed so well read – but it has turned me into a reader, and added a whole new dimension to my college experience. And there's also another benefit to being having Thematic Option on my resume – it goes a long way to offset the image of engineers as being narrowly focused and socially inept! I've learned to never underestimate the value of breadth and engaging with top professors – and no matter what field you are going into, read as much as possible while you're in high school.

**Christine Matsuda, Sophomore, from Honolulu, Hawaii, majoring in Comparative Literature, Dean's Scholar**

**My high school was pretty rigorous, and finding an academically challenging college was important to me. As I did my research, I found Thematic Option at USC.** I didn't even realize it was an honors program, it was just a really interesting approach that was different than other places, and reflected the way I look at my academics – looking at a single topic through different disciplines. You get to choose one of several themes, like "the process of change in science" where your classes might cover not just the science, but also the history of biology, with a sociological approach. I expected T.O. to be challenging and it definitely is – students are serious about working hard, and the professors are really renowned, often the chairs of their departments. It's an environment where a lot is expected of you, and you have the opportunity to rise to those expectations. I've gotten to know the other T.O. kids because the classes we take are small. And even when you're done with the core requirements, you remain in T.O., with a special advisor who helps you in amazing ways. My advice to high school students would be, don't choose an honors program just for the name or the mark on your diploma. It's not about impressing anyone, it's about finding classes that give you new ways of thinking. In high school, if you're the kind of kid who likes to speak up but sometimes feel you have to rein yourself in, that would never happen here – because everyone in T.O. is that kind of kid.

## Did you say "Community Service?"

*We may be the world champs!*

When USC was named the "College of the Year 2000" by *Time Magazine* and *Princeton Review*, one of the primary reasons cited was the extent of the University's commitment to community service. We don't know any better way to say it—community service is a deep part of the culture at USC and opportunities for students to become engaged are simply everywhere. We have biology students who teach science in the "USC Family of Schools" public schools surrounding the campus; business students who help immigrant families prepare tax returns or start up their

own companies; the Trojan Health Volunteers organizes the efforts of pre-med and health education students; USC Readers is an America Reads work-study affiliate; and there is a staggering number of outreach and service efforts by individuals, dorms, and social clubs that include everything from coaching local kids' soccer and baseball teams to teaching English and running immunization clinics for senior citizens. We estimate that fully two-thirds of our students do some kind of community service/service learning while they are here, and many cite the experience as a pinnacle of their college years. One of the best overviews of the opportunities that abound at USC can be found at our Joint Educational Project (JEP) website at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/jep>.

## How to get the most out of your campus visit

**At many high schools, watching seniors complete their application process triggers the awakening of the junior class, and their college search starts to begin in earnest! Whenever possible, that search should include a visit to a college campus.**

Spring break at your high school, when college classes are likely to be in session, is a great time to visit. The campus will be alive with students, and prospective applicants will have a chance to meet and talk with them. At USC we welcome students and their families and offer a number of ways to sample campus life.

And, since no one knows better than those who have been there before, here's some advice we got from students who have been on the college tour circuit, for those about to follow in their footsteps:

- Make an appointment for tours or classroom visits at least three weeks ahead of time.
- Check the campus calendar for visiting guest lecturers, concerts, or sports events which will add to your impression of what a campus is really like.
- Prepare a list of questions ahead of time so you don't forget anything that's important.
- Plan to arrive early in the day at the admission office to find out what classes are open to pre-freshman visitors and to confirm your tour time.
- Outside of the regular tour, allow yourself enough time to wander in the library, have a snack in the dining facilities, and browse the student bookstore.
- Above all, speak with as many students as possible so that you can get a strong sense of what any particular school is like.
- And, so that it all doesn't turn into a blur, at the end of each day, it's helpful to jot down the answers to your questions and note your general impressions while they're fresh in your mind.

We encourage prospective applicants to visit any college that they're truly interested in attending, to get an accurate picture of what that campus and its students are like, beyond the website and the viewbooks. At USC, we look forward to seeing them!

**How to contact us?** The best way to reach us is through your school's contact representative – who is listed in the directory on the back page of this newsletter. For general questions, don't hesitate to call or e-mail us at: Office of Admissions, (213) 740-1111 or [admitusc@usc.edu](mailto:admitusc@usc.edu)

## Where to Stay in LA?

**There are two hotels within walking distance of campus and many others within easy driving distance.**

**Please visit <http://afaweb.esd.usc.edu/FAQs/FAQDisplay.cfm> for some good ideas on planning your trip.**

## Did you know that USC ranks among the top dozen schools nationally in the enrollment of National Merit Scholars?

We are pleased that students from around the country are attracted to our institution. Our entering class in 2005 had 190 National Merit Scholars. As USC College Dean Joseph Aoun explains, "The purpose of a research university is to transmit and create knowledge. But here the creation of knowledge does not happen at the faculty level only." USC has recently established a comprehensive, 4-years honor and enrichment program called the College Honors Society. The program, which includes Thematic Option, Resident Honors, and Freshman Science Honors, will conduct seminars on how to complete a successful honors project. When highly motivated students such as National Merit Scholars arrive on campus, they are eager to get started on research projects themselves, and these new opportunities will allow them to undertake their next level of intellectual development.

## Setting up a campus visit

**It's common wisdom that the way to really tell if a college is right for a given student is by setting foot on its campus.** That's

especially true of USC – where many students and families report being completely – and positively – surprised at how different the reality of our campus is from the image they may have had. So, we welcome and strongly encourage your students (and you!) to see, feel, hear, touch and taste USC for themselves. Here are some of the most popular ways to do that:

**Campus Tours** 50-minute walking tours of the campus are offered Monday-Friday, every hour on the hour between 10 am and 3 pm. Reservations are required – call (213) 740-6605 to sign up.

**Meet USC Program** This half-day campus visit program includes an information session with an admission officer, a student-led walking tour and, wherever possible, meeting with an academic department representative. Available times are: Mondays 9 am and 1 pm; Wednesdays 9 am and 1 pm; Fridays 9 am and noon. Reservations are required, and there may be some days when Meet USC is not being offered. So, before making travel arrangements, please call (213) 740-6616 to check the program's schedule and to make reservations.

**Fall Open House/Discover USC** If you have students who are seriously considering applying to USC who would like a more comprehensive overview, please encourage them to attend our Fall 2006 Open House/Discover USC Program in November. This event runs from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. It's a festive and informative day that brings more than 6,000 prospective students and their parents together to visit campus, take tours, meet faculty, and learn about admission and financial aid requirements. Reservations are required. More information will be available this summer on our website.

**Special Behind the Scenes Tour of the #1 Film School in the Country!** USC's School of Cinema-Television conducts tours every Friday from 2-4 pm – this is a terrific experience for potential students and their families. From the Johnny Carson Soundstage to the Robert Zemeckis Center for Digital Arts and the Steven Spielberg Music Scoring Stage, USC is redefining state of the art. Tours begin at the loading dock of the George Lucas building. Please call (213) 740-8358 to sign up, or e-mail [cntvadmissions@cinema.usc.edu](mailto:cntvadmissions@cinema.usc.edu).

## Important Note:

**USC will be on Spring Break March-13-18.** While tours will still be available, classes will not be in session and most of the students will be gone, so if you have travel flexibility, we recommend not visiting this week.

## Use these ID codes for USC:

**CSS/College Board Code: 4852**

*For PROFILE Application and SAT scores*

**Federal School Code: 001328** *For FAFSA application*

**ACT ID Code: 0470** *For sending ACT scores*

# USC Admission Directory

**How to Contact Us** You can find the USC admission officer responsible for working with you and your students by referencing the list below. **These individuals will serve as your primary point of contact with our Office of Admission.** Counselors are also welcome to contact our office at [scounsel@usc.edu](mailto:scounsel@usc.edu).

## U.S.

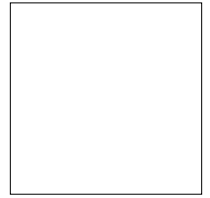
Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi . . . . .	Kevin Henry, <i>Assistant Director</i>	(213) 740-7421	khenry@usc.edu
Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah .	Beza Merid, <i>Assistant Director</i>	(213) 821-1882	merid@usc.edu
Arizona . . . . .	Bruce Grier, <i>Associate Director</i>	(213) 740-6630	bgrier@usc.edu
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North & South Carolina, West Virginia. . . . .	Rakin Hall, <i>Associate Director</i>	(213) 740-4019	rakin.hall@usc.edu
Hawaii . . . . .	Karen Rowan-Badger, <i>Director, USC College</i>	(213) 740-7200	krowan@usc.edu
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North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin . . . .	Risa Tewksbury, <i>Director, Midwest Region</i>	(217) 356-1854	tewksbur@usc.edu
Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire,			
Rhode Island, Vermont. . . . .	Patti Spada, <i>Senior Assistant Director</i>	(213) 821-2165	pspada@usc.edu
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Oregon, Washington, Wyoming. . . . .	Michael Cooper, <i>Assistant Director</i>	(213) 740-6613	mbc@usc.edu
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## California

Alameda County, Contra Costa County,			
Marin County, Sacramento County,			
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*Quarterly News for Guidance Counselors Spring 2006*

*Do we have your correct information?  
If not, please email us at [scounsel@usc.edu](mailto:scounsel@usc.edu)*

Counselor News *Quarterly Updates for Guidance Counselors*

## High School Summer Programs at USC!

### **It's the best of all summer worlds.**

Explore fascinating topics, live on campus, meet students from around the country and around the world, work with our renowned faculty, enjoy the many attractions of L.A. in summer, plus get academic credit! **Here are three exciting options being offered this summer for students who will have completed grades 9-11.**

### **Applications are available online**

**now**, so encourage your students to visit [www.usc.edu/summer](http://www.usc.edu/summer), e-mail [summer@usc.edu](mailto:summer@usc.edu) or call (213) 740-5679 soon, to start making those summer plans. Financial aid is available for students with outstanding academic performance who have financial need.

### **Live and learn on our beautiful campus!**

#### **■ Summer Seminars –**

#### **Four-Week Programs July 3-30**

Choose from twenty seminars, taught by

some of the University's best educators, in a four-week, small group format on the USC campus. Seminars meet Monday-Friday for interactive discussions, laboratory work and field trips; weekends include chaperoned recreational, cultural and social activities. Students who successfully complete the seminars earn 3 units of elective college credit, accepted at most 4-year colleges and universities.

#### **■ Exploration of Architecture – Two, Three or Four-Week Programs starting July 3**

Our School of Architecture, rated in the top 10 in the country, welcomes students from around the world to a hands-on introduction to what the life of a college architecture student and working professional architect is all about. The core of the program is built around studio design instruction and collaborative projects of different scope;

tours of the architectural landscape in the Los Angeles area, where some of the most exciting work in the world is being done, are also featured, along with visits to the offices of working architects; there's also a full complement of weekend social, recreational and cultural activities.

### **Have an island adventure!**

#### **■ Summer Science Camp for High School Women – One Week Program July 27-Aug 3**

Be part of an adventurous community of female scientists at USC's state of the art laboratory and teaching facility, the Wrigley Institute, on Catalina Island (20 miles off the coast of Los Angeles). Students will discover and explore the aquatic and terrestrial life of the island ecosystem, plus engage in instructional, recreational and mentoring activities. It's a unique, collegial and unforgettable introduction to the scientific life!