



Steven J. Sample

STEVEN B. SAMPLE

1940–2016

Elected in 1998

*“For contributions to consumer electronics and leadership
in interdisciplinary research and education.”*

BY C. L. MAX NIKIAS

STEVEN BROWNING SAMPLE, the venerable and beloved tenth president of the University of Southern California, died March 29, 2016. He was 75 years old.

During his extraordinary life, Dr. Sample cultivated a sterling reputation as an admired colleague, a gifted scholar, and a leader of international caliber. His determination, optimism, and resilience inspired the entire USC community to transcend challenges and turn them into enduring moments of transformation. He left a far-reaching and lasting legacy, and will be remembered as a deeply influential force in American higher education.

During his exceptionally productive tenure at USC, which spanned nearly two decades, Dr. Sample attracted nationally renowned faculty, increased the university’s international stature and reach, and built meaningful partnerships with its local communities. Notably, he oversaw a landmark fundraising campaign, at the time the most ambitious in the history of higher education. He stewarded five transformational gifts of over \$100 million, thus ensuring the university’s continuing expansion of groundbreaking research, an exemplary medical enterprise, and world-class facilities. He also embarked on a then-unprecedented capital construction campaign, which reshaped the university’s physical landscape.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 29, 1940, Steven Sample grew up there and in Westport, Connecticut. His mother was a civic activist and his father a sales manager for an electric motor company. Dr. Sample was deeply appreciative of the values of strong family, hard work, and a good education that his upbringing instilled in him. He often said that “most of our leaders, powerful and influential citizens, and most successful people, come from humble origins.”

While earning his BS in electrical engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), he met Kathryn Brunkow, his college sweetheart who became his loving wife of more than 55 years. He attributed much of his success to the strength he drew from his marriage and from Kathryn’s unflagging devotion. This, and the lessons of his childhood, fueled his indefatigable work ethic.

He earned his master’s (in 1963) and doctorate (in 1965, at age 24) in electrical engineering at UIUC and then spent time as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at Purdue University. But soon his insatiable curiosity for broader scientific horizons led him to join Melpar, Inc. as a senior research scientist. There he not only worked on Gemini 7 but also made history when he designed and patented the digital controls behind the touch panel now used in microwave ovens and other appliances in virtually every home in the United States.

When he was 29 he received a fellowship that allowed him to work alongside the president of Purdue. He witnessed the ways a university president must employ a multitude of skills and cultivate a broad understanding of various fields, which appealed to his endlessly inquisitive mind and drive to innovate.

In 1974 Dr. Sample was appointed vice president for academic affairs and graduate dean of the University of Nebraska for eight years.

At the age of 41 he became president of the State University of New York at Buffalo. During his tenure (1982–1991), the university made unprecedented gains in establishing itself as a major national research center. Perhaps the most prominent symbol of this was the university’s election to the prestigious

Association of American Universities, whose members constitute less than 2 percent of the nation's colleges and universities. He also implemented economic development initiatives, such as the use of university equipment by local industries, and unorthodox programs to create high-tech incubators, which spawned 41 new firms in five years. This approach to education in service of the community became a recurring theme in his career.

Upon arriving at USC as president (1991–2010), Dr. and Mrs. Sample began a love affair with the Trojan Family. They embraced every facet of the university and quickly identified its potential as a microcosm of the 21st century global society. Thanks to his tactical leadership and prudent foresight, USC transformed from a regionally well-known private school to one of the most selective universities in the nation.

One of the keys of this rapid ascent was Dr. Sample's dedication to attracting the most brilliant scholars and researchers in the United States. Under his leadership USC doubled both its research funding and the number of faculty elected to membership in the National Academy of Engineering, National Academy of Sciences, and National Academy of Medicine. Faculty member George Olah was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for work he conducted at USC.

In addition to recruiting stellar faculty, Dr. Sample dramatically increased USC's global stature and reach. He made a series of trips to forge international partnerships and led efforts to establish university satellite offices in several countries. He cofounded the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, a consortium of the region's 45 leading research universities.

The achievement that perhaps best reflects Dr. Sample's character, and his view of a meaningful education, is the massive community outreach effort he launched at USC. Seeing that many of the areas around the university were struggling economically, he met with community leaders to hear their concerns and worked with them to find solutions to long-standing problems. His primary focus was to improve public schools in the area, and the USC Family of Schools—a group of local schools “adopted by USC”—became the flagship of

his community programs. Among these is the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, a seven-year precollege enrichment program designed to prepare low-income neighborhood students for admission to a college or university. USC's tremendous commitment to public service led to the university being named *Time* magazine's College of the Year 2000.

For his unparalleled leadership of both SUNY Buffalo and USC, Dr. Sample is widely acclaimed as one of the best university presidents of the past half-century as well as an accomplished engineer and scientist. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1998 and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2003.

He received the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Founders Medal, as well as honorary doctorates from the University of Notre Dame, Purdue University, the University of Sheffield in England, the University of Nebraska, Hebrew Union College, Canisius College in Buffalo, Northeastern University, D'Youville College in Buffalo, and SUNY Buffalo.

In addition to Kathryn, he is survived by daughters Michelle Sample Smith (Kirk) and Elizabeth Sample, and grandchildren Kathryn and Andrew Smith.

Very few possess mettle, focus, and determination to peer into the fog of uncertainty, sense the promise within, and move boldly forward. Dr. Sample taught us that the greatest promise always comes not from places but from people—the true bedrock of any great university. During his celebrated tenure of nineteen and a half years as president of the University of Southern California, he was a champion of the kind of education that teaches us to understand ourselves and our capabilities, and encourages us to use that knowledge in service to humanity.

