

# futures in Urban Ed



# “conversations

ON EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

*Recently, USC President C.L. Max Nikias sat down with University Professor William G. Tierney to talk about leadership. USC's eleventh president has held his title since fall 2010, and has been at USC since 1991, as a professor, director of national research centers, dean, and provost. Tierney is the Wilbur-Kieffer Professor of Higher Education at USC Rossier and director of the newly named Pullias Center for Higher Education.*

**Bill Tierney:** What traits do you need to be a college president or leader?

**Max Nikias:** This is what I've found when it comes to leadership. I came up with a very simple triangle. And in the three corners, I can place three philosophers from antiquity – Plato, Heraclitus, and Cicero.

For Plato, the definition of virtue is knowledge. Virtue for Heraclitus is character. And then you have the great Cicero, who said virtue is reason, the ability to have good judgment--and of course that comes with experience.

“THE BEST TRAINING FOR LEADERSHIP IS LEADERSHIP”

—C.L. MAX NIKIAS

If you are going to be a good university president or good leader, whatever the organization, to me the three fundamental pillars or ingredients are: first, good knowledge of what you're leading. Second, good character, which defines who you are. And third, good judgment which is essential for tough decisions you have to make, where you have to relentlessly prepare and look at all possible outcomes. Do your homework, and based on all the knowledge you have up to that point, you try to make your best decision.

Those three, for me...I go back to them all the time.

**BT: How much do you think leadership depends on context? You know this place like the back of your hand. You've got a relationship with faculty...**

**MN:** Look at the success we have had in my first year, which included breaking records in fundraising in American higher education. Well, I couldn't have had this success if I had come from somewhere else to be President here. That's because a lot of my relationships and my reputation within USC were built over the course of a lifetime, for the past 20 years...

**BT: It didn't ensure success but it had the conditions.**

**MN:** That's right. It established the conditions.

**BT: Who are role models for you in general?**

**MN:** My role models in many ways come from the history books. Because I love history and I always love reading biographies. It's what I learn from reading their lives and their stories. Also, I have been watching, very carefully in my career, people in academic leadership, including (former USC President) Steve Sample. Sometimes from just watching people, you learn a lot. You may not do it exactly like they do, but at least you learn. So I was always observing carefully.

**BT: There's a famous article called "Leadership is a Language Game," which talks about communication, and the importance of communicating. Where does that fit in? When I've watched you, it seems a lot of your day is talking to people...**

**MN:** You're right. You have to be a good communicator. You have to be able to articulate the strengths and the mission of the university. So I find that is extremely important. But there is one more thing. You cannot be successful unless you have a positive personality.

**BT: But you have to believe it also. I think people can see a phony.**

**MN:** Another thing about the university environment, Bill, is that we as professors are a profession of idealists. Right? And you know very well, you don't tell a professor what to do. Anything we want to do in a university environment, yes, you have to have the right incentives and you have to have the right policies in place. But at the end of the day, you have to lead by example and inspiration.

**BT: Do you think social media has changed the way you work?**

**MN:** For me, it's changed a lot about how we reach out to students, and how we interact with each other. Also, here's one thing I love about this new technology: it's forcing all of us in this university environment – including the professors – to become learners, not just teachers. We are all a community of learners.

**BT: Bill Clinton, who was talking about some of the problems that President Obama has had, said, "There are objective reasons why huge numbers of Americans are confused, angry, frustrated, and afraid. In that environment, the proper response is relentless explanation and dialogue."**

**I think there's a component that can say that's true in higher education right now. People are afraid, angry, frustrated. How do you see your role in that, not just at 'SC, but on the larger stage?**

**MN:** I think that what we're missing on the larger stage is for university presidents or academia in general to articulate to the general public the role that our research universities play in society and what a difference we make. There are certain things that we take for granted. And then we let other voices take over, and because of the economic environment, they claim that we're too expensive, that we're too inefficient, that we should run universities more like businesses. I don't think we've done enough to explain to the general public that we are very different from any other business. And education is the greatest equalizer of society. You take the children of the have-nots, of the immigrants, everybody, and once they receive a first-class education from one of our universities, you change them for life.

**BT: It struck me that if you look back, there are giants who were university presidents who were major players on the U.S. scene. David Starr Jordan, Woodrow Wilson... But today, it's not the case. So, isn't this cause for concern?**

**MN:** It is a cause for concern. That's a reflection more of what's going on in the public university arena. There are so many university presidents from public universities who for one reason or another in the last six months have stepped down. It's probably now around 10 or 11 total. But what surprised me the most was their average span of tenure in office – it wasn't more than 4 years, or 4.2.

**BT: So longevity has something to do with success?**

**MN:** Yes. I'm a very strong believer of that, Bill. Because in a university environment, you're going to reap the benefits of decisions you make today perhaps 10 years down the road. You do research today but then it takes a window of 5 to 7 years to truly make an impact. So to have this longevity in office – let's say a 10 year cycle – for me, it's one of the necessary conditions for success.

**BT: So you also have to have a vision.**

**MN:** Yes, you have to have a vision of where you want to take the university. You have to get faculty to participate shaping the vision, and then you need an execution plan, and, of course, the support of all the other constituencies. Above all, you have to have your board of trustees buy into it. So a university president today has a lot of different constituent groups that you want to pay attention to, to make sure they are all on board.

**BT: I couldn't get out of here without giving you a quote from the classics, so let me give you something from Pericles. He said, "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others." As a leader, what do you want to leave behind for the Trojan Family?**

**MN:** Two things – One, that I've been able to touch the minds, the souls or the hearts of a lot of our students in my years as president. Hopefully, they can remember that for the rest of their lives and tell others about it. That comes from the personal interaction, and I do a lot of that.

Two - When people look back at my years as president, I hope they would see that I've truly made a big difference for this university, so that it moved up academically. The vision is for USC to truly become a world-class university of the highest rank, and that's what we're working for. We know it's not easy, and a lot of hard work is required. But that's the ambition and the vision we have, and I want people to say we made enormous progress toward that goal. Those are the two. And it doesn't have to be written in stone (*laughs*).

**BT: The School of Cinema will have a movie of it...It's impossible to think of you only as president. You're a father, a husband, an immigrant to this country, a Greek. How has that impacted how you see the world and your work?**

**MN:** A big difference. My daughters helped me so much, being USC students here. My God, that was priceless. They helped me understand this university's core functions much better. They gave me a view from the trenches. That's why I keep reaching out to groups of students now. I spend time with these student groups, without anyone else in the room. I talk to these groups the same way I talk to my daughters. You'd be amazed what you learn from them. And I couldn't have followed through on this commitment, this undertaking, without the support of my wife. It could be very cold and lonely without having a partner in this endeavor.

**BT: Do you think you're seeing the world differently than someone who was born here in the States?**

**MN:** I believe I do, and talk to my daughters about this all the time. Being an immigrant, coming to the United States as a foreign student, nothing is given to you. You don't take anything for granted. You have no position anywhere waiting for you. You don't even have a network of friends or contacts. Therefore, you have to work very hard for it. And when you do, Bill, you get rewarded. But it's only in America. I believe I wouldn't have had the career I do in any other part of the world. On the evening that [USC board chairman] Ed Roski called to tell me that the board unanimously voted to elect me as the next president, as soon as we hung up, I sat my daughters on the couch, and I said, "Look, I want you to promise me that you will never forget this moment. Only in America could two people like me and your mom, who came to this country just for a better life through better education, come to the point that we reached tonight." Bill, I appreciate that. It's a warm feeling; it's a very warm feeling.

**BT: What has been the biggest challenge, or surprise?**

**MN:** Immediately you come to the realization, you are the president. Immediately, how the trustees see you or the rest of the university sees you changes. All of a sudden, overnight it was very different, and it was so obvious and visible to me. And it's constantly in my mind. That surprised me.

**BT: When I was in college, I worked at a homeless shelter, and Sundays I ran the place. The chair of the board was in the back room. One day, something happened. I was 20 years old, and I ran in and said, "What should I do?" And he said, "You're in charge, and if you can't deal with it, you shouldn't be in charge. So go out there and deal with it." It was a good lesson.**

**MN:** I'm a very strong believer that the best training for leadership is leadership. That's how you learn to swim. They throw you in the ocean, and you start swimming (*laughs*). ■