

MEMORANDUM

To: Viterbi School Faculty and Staff

From: Yannis C. Yortsos, Dean 

Date: March 31, 2017

Subject: John O'Brien, Executive Vice Dean

It is with profound sadness that I share the news that John O'Brien, Executive Vice Dean and the Louise Dunn Professor of Engineering, passed away unexpectedly today.

In his relatively short but brilliant career, John was an outstanding scientist and engineer, a superb administrator, but above all a remarkable human being. His loss will be deeply felt across all aspects of USC Viterbi, from student and faculty recruitment to academic programs, to research and mentoring and to strategic directions. But most importantly, John's lasting legacy will be that he helped establish in the school a remarkable culture of collaboration and inclusion, one based on character and ethics, respect and understanding, selflessness and kindness, service and commitment, and the constant pursuit of excellence.

John joined USC in 1997 as Assistant Professor of Electrical Engineering, following his Master's and PhD in Applied Physics from Caltech in 1993 and 1996, respectively, and completing a one-year Postdoctoral Scholar appointment at Caltech. A graduate of Iowa State University with a BS degree in Electrical Engineering (with honors), he quickly rose through the ranks, becoming Associate Professor in 2003 and Professor of Electrical Engineering in 2006.

His academic career was simply outstanding, with a number of early and mid-career achievements and awards, such as an ARO Young Investigator Award and a PECASE Award in 1998, an NSF CAREER Award in 2000, the IEEE/LEOS Distinguished Lecturer in 2006-2008, and election as Fellow of the Optical Society of America (OSA) in 2008 "for contributions to the science and technology of photonic crystal devices." He was named holder of the Louise L. Dunn Endowed Professorship in Engineering in 2015.

In 2006, I invited John to become a key member of the Dean's office as Senior Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and Academic Programs, which he eagerly accepted. Since then, he served in the Dean's office, and in 2011, he was appointed as the first USC Viterbi Executive Vice Dean. Even though his scientific future was always bright, his decision to join an administrative office derived



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from his immense desire to serve. In the question frequently asked by many colleagues, “*Why choose an administrative position?*” John would always reply that it was *an honor to serve*. He truly and single-handedly defined the EVD position. All of his administrative actions reflected creative, collegial, and intelligent solutions to the underlying issues. For John, all problems were solvable.

During a critical period for the Information Sciences Institute (ISI), he simultaneously served as the interim ISI Executive Director, deftly and with remarkable ability guiding its leadership transition to current Keston Executive Director Prem Natarajan. Since then, John continued serving as a strategic advisor to Prem and ISI and being its tireless champion.

His loss will be deeply felt not only across USC Viterbi, but also across USC overall. Despite his quiet and unassuming demeanor, his influence and impact were deeply respected and appreciated by many of his colleagues across campus, as well as by the higher USC administration. I cannot find words to adequately express the School's, and my own, deep, personal gratitude.

We were fortunate that such a remarkable and talented human being crossed our paths and devoted his professional life to make us all better. We owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.

A funeral service will be held in Des Moines, Iowa, with a specific date to be announced soon. The USC Viterbi School of Engineering will hold an event in the near future to celebrate his life. Details will be announced as they become available.

cc: USC President
USC Provost and Provost Cabinet
USC Viterbi Boards