

USC: An affront or a compliment to San Diego?

By San Diego Union-Tribune Editorial Board | 5 p.m. July 29, 2015

The University of Southern California has been nothing if not persistent in its controversial and unsuccessful efforts to reach down the coast from Los Angeles to build a profile as a biomedical research powerhouse in San Diego. It's tempting to see the USC moves as an affront to academic ethics, to research protocols and especially to UC San Diego. There is truth in that view, to be sure. But, as much as anything, it is a huge compliment to San Diego and its world-class science community.

More than 26,000 people work in the life science and biotech institutes atop Torrey Pines Mesa, the hub of San Diego's scientific family, at places such as UCSD, the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, The Scripps Research Institute, the Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute and the J. Craig Venter Institute. Thousands more are headquartered nearby and in mini-hubs elsewhere in San Diego and in North County.

This collection of highly regarded institutions has made San Diego one of the top research clusters in the nation, with the work of the scientists recognized around the world.

USC, loaded with money and hoping to build a bigger brand of its own in the science world, evidently thought San Diego would be easy picking.

The private university first tried last year to acquire or merge with The Scripps Research Institute, sparking a faculty rebellion at SRI that doomed the USC move. This June, USC lured away Dr. Paul Aisen, a highly regarded researcher at UCSD, and attempted to commandeer the \$100 million nationwide Alzheimer's study that had been coordinated by UCSD since 1991 and that Aisen had directed for the past eight years. That effort failed when UCSD took USC to court and won a ruling earlier this month that the Alzheimer's study data and funding were the property of UCSD.

As reported last weekend by the Union-Tribune's Gary Robbins, USC also went after the highly respected La Jolla Institute for Allergy and Immunology, located in the UC San Diego Science Research Park east of I-5 and the main UCSD campus. USC's move to take over or partner with the institute was foiled when UCSD stepped in and struck a \$36 million deal making the institute an affiliate of UCSD.

Officials at both USC and UCSD deny it, but all this maneuvering could not help but create bad blood; some of the public comments drip with tension, if not bitterness.

Hopefully, the two schools can soon move beyond the ugliness of the court fight over the Alzheimer's study.

As noted in this space earlier this month, if USC acts transparently and responsibly, there is room for it in San Diego. There is room for its newly created Alzheimer's Therapeutic Research Institute, directed by Aisen in Sorrento Valley, and there is time for it to develop on its own into an internationally recognized research facility. There is room for partnerships with established San Diego institutions.

USC could be a complement and a compliment to San Diego.