



# LEARNED *Ladies*

*Three women chancellors helming top American universities shows the rise of soft power in higher education.*

## SUCCESS SUTRAS



Drew Faust



Susan Hockfield



Renu Khator

**The face of educational leadership** is changing in the 21st century. The new face is softer and less formal than in the previous centuries. I recently had the privilege of meeting three woman presidents of major US universities: Drew Faust, the first woman President of Harvard University, Susan Hockfield, the first woman and the first life scientist to hold the position of President of MIT and our own Renu Khator, the first Indian American woman to become the Chancellor and President of a major American school, the University of Houston.

The three prima donnas of higher education represent the soft power of informality. Drew Faust is a champion of liberal education. She says that in the global economic crisis her focus belongs not on what we have lost, but on what we have as our human heritage. As we adapt to a rapidly changing world, Drew Faust's Harvard harks back to long traditions of liberal arts education and of humanistic inquiry.

These traditions can generate both the self-scrutiny and self-understanding that lead through doubt to wisdom. "It is not Harvard's job to make carpenters out of men but to make men out of carpenters," I remind her of her once famous utterance. She nods

in agreement. Like her counter part across the river, MIT's president Susan Hockfield represents the new narrative of higher education. She integrates rather than dissects issues during her conversation with us. She decides through informal consultation rather than formal authority.

The new story of higher education is about plasticity of knowledge that "flows" seamlessly across rigid disciplines. For a long time higher education has been classified into false and misleading categories: physical versus life sciences, arts versus engineering. When knowledge flows across disciplines I would like to call it flowledge - knowledge that is freeflowing and fluid. Flowledge has given birth to such emerging disciplines as biomechanics, nuclear medicine and conscious capitalism.

In a way flowledge represents the rise of the creative whole brain from the predominant left-brain structures that ruled academia. This domination had created strict hierarchies and gives birth to rigid and often impermeable disciplines. The age of the whole brain will set right some of the asymmetries in our cortical hemispheres. In this, women who bring those soft cortical skills and big-picture perception of life

to the job will triumph over lopsidedly analytical and data distracted left-brainers. Nurtured by this new leadership, higher education will mean more than just hire education. The mantra of higher education will be more like what Harvard's Drew Faust would like to imagine - making humans out of carpenters.

I shall return to Renu Khator who I met informally over dinner hosted by Meera Shankar, India's ambassador to the US and then again formally at a meeting with India's education Minister Kapil Sibal in Washington DC. Renu said that she comes from a small UP town of Farrukhabad: "I was only 18 years old when I got married. I cried for 10 days as I wanted higher education rather than marriage." Her husband, Suresh Khator, who now serves as Professor at the same university that Renu serves as Chancellor, fulfilled her desire to learn and lead.

"So, you are your husband's boss in school. How do you handle that?" Renu responds with unstudied grace and humility, "My husband often introduces me as someone whose boss's boss reports to me. He made me what I am today. I am the product of his contribution. I am grateful to him for that."

Her story blueprints the rise of a first generation Indian immigrant from an obscure town in North India to hard earned glory in north America. She embodies the coming of age of soft power of India inside the once insular corner office of white Anglo-Saxon male dominated American education. ■

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