



UH_President_Issues_Facing_Higher_Education_Today
September 8, 2014

Craig Cohen

0:00:03.0 This is *Houston Matters*. I'm Craig Cohen. Since January 2008 Renu Khator has served as Chancellor of the University of Houston system and President of UH. In that role she oversees an organization serving more than 67,000 students and a university system that has a significant impact on the Greater Houston community. She's the first woman to serve as chancellor of the University of Houston and the first Indian immigrant to head a comprehensive research university in the United States, and she joins us today to field your questions about the University of Houston and issues facing higher education. President Khator, welcome to Houston Matters.

Renu Khator

Thank you very much, Craig. I'm delighted to be here.

Craig Cohen

And to join us on air with your questions about UH or higher education in general call 713-440-8870. Email talk@houstonmatters.org, or you can send us a tweet. Our Twitter handle is @houstonmatters. As we await those calls, President Khator, let's talk about some recent developments here at the University of Houston, and I'm going to start with a question from Ashlyn Lee in the Museum District. We headed out on campus and in surrounding areas to solicit questions for you from her and from others. Here's Ashlyn's question.

Ashlyn Lee

I know that she's really big on having a top tier one school and everything, so I want to see where we're headed. What's the next big transformation or transition or project she wants to accomplish?

Renu Khator

Thank you very much, Ashlyn, for your question. This is a very, very important question. Tier one basically means pursuit of excellence, being nationally competitive in every field, in research and graduate education, in undergraduate education, in serving and building your community, your neighborhood. Now, if you look at the undergraduate education, I just don't think we have reached our agenda yet. Our graduation rate, college completion rate, is really not where I want to see it, and at this point that is my number one, no excuse priority. I want to make sure all those students who come to the University of Houston that they not just come to the campus but they also leave with a degree in their hand. And a lot of things we are doing here is

really to make sure the students are leaving with the skill sets so they are leaders in this world and they're successful in life. I take a lot of pride in saying that when the University of Houston graduates their students they are not graduating just degree ready or job ready. They are graduating life ready. That's one big thing, and we have our big rocks. Energy, we have to serve and fill the need of the energy industry in Houston. We have the largest Texas medical center here. We have to see what role we play in the healthcare area. We have a fabulous arts economy and arts community here. We have to be relevant to our arts economy, and we have to really see what more we do in our athletics program. It was phenomenal to have the TDECU Stadium open, the fan experience, the beautiful environment, but we have a lot of work left in all of those areas. Thank you, Ashlyn, for your confidence, and thank you for asking the question.

Craig Cohen

0:03:12.9 You mentioned that you would like to see the completion rate higher for the University of Houston. What is that rate at this point?

Renu Khator

The completion rate when I came here was about 40 percent, 6-year graduation. And at this point it's touching 50 percent, but I know with a lot of initiatives we have the retention rate, which is from first year to second, second to third—that's how you virtually have the completion rate—is very, very strong. And that means that needle is going to move way above state and national averages, and I think that would be the day for me when I can see our student body, a very diverse student body—Craig, you may or may not know that, but we are the second most diverse research university in the country, and to take our diversity and make sure the diversity and excellence are not put in two mutually exclusive categories, that we actually will take and make sure we can be the best in the country in getting these students to graduate and complete college would be a real big treat for the University of Houston.

Craig Cohen

The cost of paying for college nationwide has escalated over the years. What's the situation here with the University of Houston? Are costs of attending going up?

Renu Khator

The cost of education definitely has gone up. Tuition has gone up. The student debt is over a trillion dollars now. It is a matter of concern from a national point of view, but we've been very, very conscious at the University of Houston. We rank nationally among the top ten. As a matter of fact, number seventh ranked in terms of being the most affordable university, graduating students with the least amount of debt at the time of graduation, and we take a lot of pride in that. I think the Texas legislature, because they have the Texas grants program, that helps us, the federal grants, they help us. Institutional grants, our donors, our alumni, we're all focused on it. We actually have a program called Cougar Promise, and that means if your family income is

\$45,000 or less we don't charge tuition. I want to make sure as long as you have fire in your belly you come to the University of Houston, and you get your degree from here, you graduate, and you go and be successful.

Craig Cohen

0:05:30.8 Enrollment is on the rise. The UH system now serves more than 67,000 students. Is there a limit on the number of students that the UH system can ultimately serve?

Renu Khator

Well, is there a limit to what the city of Houston can have in terms of people? No. I would say we have to be relevant to our community, our surroundings, our city and our state. The state is growing. The city is growing. We are right now 67,000 students at the system level. There is a lot of growth possible. Two of our system institutions have just become four-year institutions. That means they've started taking freshman, and they will grow undoubtedly. Even though there's a growth at the University of Houston, even though I think at 40,000 we are at a point where I would rather focus on the success agenda right now, I want the students to complete college where we have a lot of growth potential, and we'll definitely keep on growing at the University of Houston but more so on our other system institutions.

Craig Cohen

This is Houston Matters. I'm Craig Cohen. We're fielding your questions about the University of Houston and higher education for UH Chancellor and President Renu Khator. You can call us at 713-440-8870 or email talk@houstonmatters.org. You can also send us a tweet. We are @houstonmatters. Let's go to Mike in Copperfield. Hi, Mike. What's your question?

Mike

I think you're doing a great job, but I have two issues. One, the football stadium, and two, tier one. The football stadium, you just opened a new one on Friday, \$120 million, 40,000 seats, and then Baylor, \$250 million on their stadium and A&M \$450 million on their stadium, so we're kind of like the Romans with gladiators. But instead of using that money for football how close are you to tier one? Because you're advertising like you have tier one, and in Texas we really need more tier one schools.

Renu Khator

Thank you very much. As for the stadium, we opened it with 40,000 seats. They're all filled. The capacity in the stadium is that we can add 20,000 more seats, so for all the fans, alumni, please come to the games. We'll add 20,000 more seats there. As for the tier one, it is true in 2011 we did receive designation of a tier one institution, so we are the third public tier one university in the state of Texas. I always keep saying that is one designation by the country. I'm not happy with what we are doing in terms of undergraduate education. We really have to do far better

there, beat all the averages at the state level and national level, because if you think about it, Houston is an incredible city and a city of the future because the whole of America is going to look like Houston. The same thing with the University of Houston with our diversity. We are the prototype of America. We are in an experiment. I want to make sure we can take this very, very diverse population and we can absolutely excel in everything possible. Are we a tier one? Yes, according to the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching we are a tier one institution. Do we have more things to do? Absolutely. We have many, many areas where we have not fulfilled our potential, and that's where we'll continue to work.

Craig Cohen

0:08:54.4 Recently we learned the university was considering requiring freshman to live on campus starting next year. Before the idea was brought before the board you pulled it from consideration after conversation and texts with State Senator John Whitmire, who is a UH alum who opposed the idea. Those texts were published in the *Houston Chronicle*, and in one of them the senator appeared to threaten legislation to stop the idea. That in turn led in recent days to a criminal complaint followed against the senator by a conservative group which sees that text as no different from the charges filed against Governor Perry. The senator called the complaint "silly." Nevertheless, this all underscores how any more you want to make involving university policy I imagine needs significant buy-in from a lot of places, not just faculty and staff and students but alumni, politicians and the general public. How much of your job is administrative, and how much of it is political?

Renu Khator

Actually, there's both administrative, political. There's also academic. I visited seventeen classes the first week of semester, so I saw all of this. If you look at where the university is today, where it was when it started eighty-five plus years ago, where it was ten years ago, where it was six years ago when I came here, this university is in Houston. It has truly transformed itself. Right now nationally we're known as one of the most transformed institutions of higher education, and it has not been possible without the support of everybody, without the buy-in of people. We have had tremendous buy-in from the business sector, from the political sector, from our alumni, donors, students, faculty. And I feel we do, and our goal is student success. We have moved the agenda from just access to really student success, their college completion. And that is my no excuse priority, and we'll keep moving forward. There are probably twenty different strategies one can put in place. In order to do that we'll keep doing as many as we can. But the agenda has moved, and it continues to move forward, so I'm very thankful to this city, incredible city and incredible state, because people often invite me, and they ask me, "How do you build a tier one university? What did you do at Houston?" And I tell them it is Houston. It's Texas. Things are possible.

Craig Cohen

Do you have any qualms about incidents like what I just described as having any impact on the perception of your authority to move the university forward?

Renu Khator

0:11:27.4 Well, I think what people should see is that I have definite willingness to pause, to listen. If there's a very strong supporter, somebody has very intense views, I think I'd like to hear and see what those issues are. But I think all of us, everybody in the city, all of the Cougars and all of our supporters, they all want the university to do better. I think they have a point of view, and together I think wherever we go is going to be a better road for us.

Craig Cohen

To the idea itself of requiring freshmen to live on campus, is that something you hope to revisit down the road if you feel you have that buy-in?

Renu Khator

Well, right now I believe the numbers haven't come in, but at least 40 percent of freshman already are choosing to live on campus. There are always different ways of making things happen. You can encourage, incentivize. You can require and waive. We'll look at all the different options. I always say keep your eyes on the goal. Our goal is student success. Our goal is college completion. I want to have all of those students who we admit to really complete the college. The strategies, some will work, some may not work, some may be right, some may not be right. I'm willing to listen, and together I think we're going to continue to build a university that Houston and Texas can be proud of.

Craig Cohen

So part of that could be more on campus living down the road, that that could lead to a higher completion rate if students are more involved in the campus by living there.

Renu Khator

Well, national research, that's definitely research from the University of Houston, the students who live on campus. This is about freshmen, if the freshmen who live on campus—it gives them a good head start. Their GPA is higher. Their course completion is higher. But that doesn't mean that's the only way to accomplish that task, so I'm very open. I'm very willing to listen, because again, we all want the right thing for our university, and we want to really have a phenomenal university that everybody can be proud of. We are on a transformation agenda, and we'll continue.

Craig Cohen

One of the reasons I drilled down on this a little bit is it speaks to an overriding philosophy or attitude towards what the University of Houston system is, what purpose it serves. How do you turn it into the campus that you want, which ultimately may be more dorms, more on campus living, more of that engagement, without shutting out those who count on it as a school to which they can commute each day?

Renu Khator

0:14:02.2 It's a very interesting question, which you're forgetting in this sense is that 40,000 students attend the University of Houston. Out of those are 3,800 freshmen. Say that freshmen, we build the dorms, and dorms are 8,000. That that means that commuters are not welcome, I think that's a misperception. We have to be an inviting place, a welcoming place, a successful place for all the students. Otherwise we cannot be successful because we are a public university. We take our mission very seriously. All students, we graduate students who are eighty-six years old. We graduate students who are eighteen years old. We have students who work and come, and we have students who want to live full time. But the whole thing is the goal has to be that you come here and you need to get your degree from here. I do not want you to drop out. When I visited seventeen classes reaching all freshmen, I could easily do that in one email, but that's not the same thing. I wanted to stand in front of them and tell them unless you and I do something different here, the statistics are that in six years only out of two of you are going to graduate. That's a shocking statistic. Let's make sure that we don't make excuses for that kind of statistics. Let's do something right. You can do some things. I can do some things. We all can do some things, and let's get you to graduate.

Craig Cohen

Since most UH students do commute to campus, they need parking spaces. That is the subject of our next question from Vanessa Rioso of La Porte.

Vanessa Rioso

I'd like to know if we are going to get expanded parking, because parking is pretty terrible, especially in the mornings. It's very hard to find a parking spot. I've come to class an hour early, and it still takes me a while to find a spot.

Renu Khator

Yes, I think you're right. Parking is an issue. The first two weeks it's always real intense. It generally calms down a limit, not to say it will calm down completely. We have built so many parking garages, one after another after another. We have two more on the drawing board. We'll keep on doing it, but we hope as there are more students living on campus they won't need their cars. We have light rail coming. That will certainly help a little bit more. We'll build a few more

parking spaces, and I hope that helps a bit too. I do understand what you're saying. Not making excuses, but we're always looking into how can we address the parking better.

Craig Cohen

0:16:40.9 We're talking with University of Houston Chancellor and President Renu Khator. We'll take more of your question at talk@houstonmatters.org or 713-440-8870 as Houston Matters continues.

(break)

This is Houston Matters. I'm Craig Cohen. We're talking with University of Houston Chancellor and President Renu Khator. We welcome your questions about UH and higher education at 713-440-8870 or talk@houstonmatters.org. You can also send us a tweet. We are @houstonmatters. We'll go to the main campus of the University of Houston. Addie has a question. Hi, Addie. What's your question?

Addie

Hi, my name is Addie, and I graduated the University of Houston in 2013. And throughout my time there in four years I never had an African American professor. Is there a reason for that, or is there anything the University of Houston is doing to increase the diversity among professors? Because I know we are a very diverse campus, but the amount of African American professors is also lacking.

Renu Khator

That's a very important question. We can always do more in terms of diversity. I don't think we have the diversity of what we should have given our diversity of our student body. But I am really surprised that you never encountered an African American professor during your four years. That does surprise me. There are tenured and tenure earning professors. There are visiting faculty. There are lecturers, and then there are all other kinds as well in the classroom. If you combine all of them, all the people we put in front of the classroom, we actually have more African Americans in front of the classroom in one way or another teaching than UT and A&M combined. At least that's the report from the university that tells me so. I am surprised about it. Do we need to increase? Absolutely we need to increase because we do need role models. There are some outstanding faculty out there, and you probably have heard that we just hired an African American dean of our law school, which I believe is only one of four in the country. I have two members in my cabinet who are African American, so hopefully some of these things will help. We have several programs as well. But thank you for bringing up that question, and thank you for raising that issue again. We definitely need to do more and do better.

Craig Cohen

Daniel is in Midtown. Hi, Daniel. What's your question?

Daniel

Good afternoon. My question for President Khator is I currently attend University of Houston, and recently I saw a study that indicated that the University of Houston was among the top eleven universities which was hardest to get an A in. The value of the degree unfortunately doesn't reflect the difficulty. What is the university doing to help its image not only with Texas but throughout the United States?

Renu Khator

0:19:50.9 I think we are one of those universities where our substance is ahead of our reputation. And I would say it partly reflects also what I hear in conversation about Houston. Houston has so much to offer, so much richness, but it doesn't have the same reputation around. But what we are going to do about it, we are going to do two things. One is we stay focused on increasing our substance and make sure that we truly are offering the product that's the best, because the product will speak for itself. And the second thing is we can brag about ourselves a little bit more. We can tell better stories, so I think pretty soon you're going to see a major campaign that will speak about the power and the product that we have. We're looking at both of these things, but I'm one of those people I do believe. We've just got to focus and offer absolutely the best product that you can. I go back to that. We need to really make sure the students who come to the university don't leave without really graduating. They leave having completed college because they are the ones who are going to go there, prove the merit and the worth of the University of Houston degree and do better for us.

Craig Cohen

We have an email from Kate. She says, "I teach AP world history here at HISD." She says, "I also work helping other teachers in the district who are new to the course. It's a wonderful and challenging course and one that really is a benefit to students who are willing to try a challenging course even when they are sophomores." Her question is, "Why does the University of Houston not recognize this class and give students who pass the National AP Exam credit at this university?"

Renu Khator

I wish I knew the answer. I don't know the detail about it, AP courses that count, which don't count, how we qualify, how we don't. But what I know is that we have so many articulation agreements even with our community colleges. We try to see every way possible that we can accept the credits that are equal credits, and if there are areas like what you just now pointed out, if there are areas where we need to do better we should definitely look into it because at the end

of the day it's really not about the paperwork. It's really about what you have learned. You have the skills, and how is it that we certify the skills that you have toward your degree?

Craig Cohen

0:22:30.5 Let's next go to Patrick in Oak Forest. Hi, Patrick. What's your question?

Patrick

Well, I'm actually a graduate of UH, and it goes back to a little bit of what one of the previous callers was talking about. It's hard to get an A, but then we're also talking about we want to increase the substance, the quality of the education. I've maintained a friendship with the director of my degree plan after I graduated, and he confirmed a lot of what I felt, that a lot of my professors were really pretty terrible. The quality of the education I received was really terrible, and he sort of apologized and said, "By the time you made it to the top it was too late to save you, so I couldn't really do much about it." It seems like really the emphasis is more on shoveling kids through than providing a really quality education.

Renu Khator

I don't know if you're talking in terms of the general national question or you're talking about the University of Houston. One thing I always tell people and even when I just visited those seventeen freshmen classes I tell them as we do our alumni survey one thing that every single time is on top of the list from alumni is their faculty. They don't talk about any other thing in terms of their most cherished memory. What they say is it's the faculty who took interest, who cared for them, and they generally name a faculty or two faculty or three faculty. I can tell you that in comparison to many, many universities we have more of our professors, full-time professors, research professors, in classroom spending time with the students, caring for them, because they know that is very fundamental to our mission. That's how the University of Houston was founded. In all of this shuffle in terms of tier one talk or anything we have not let go of that important component. We know that if you touch lives you can change them, and our professors, I'm very proud to say that they do believe in that. In terms of raising quality of education what I want to raise is really making sure the students have the support and have everything else that surrounds their experience on campus so that they don't get lost and they don't drop out. They do complete their degree. As for the quality of instruction inside the classroom I think our faculty do a phenomenal job. I really thank them. If there are any issues with it we find out through the student evaluation survey, and we have the Center for Teaching Excellence. Generally the department chairs advise the faculty to seek help there. It's a continuous improvement process, all hands on deck, and that's how we become better.

Craig Cohen

The main campus of the University of Houston is located southeast of downtown off of I-45, and it's surrounded by neighborhoods that have experienced light and high crime rates in recent years. How much of a responsibility does the university owe to the community that surrounds it? What steps can you take to help build up those neighborhoods?

Renu Khator

0:25:55.0 We are part of the same neighborhood. If the neighborhood is good, we are good. It's a very, very historic neighborhood. It's amazing. If you go and take a tour of the neighborhood you'll find the richness that's there. It's incredible work people are doing in terms of revitalizing the arts community, the Project Row House. And we have a university neighborhood partnership forum. I hope that we can find our common vision together, and together we can see how is it that we make each other better, because I think we can learn a lot. We have a lot to gain from the neighborhood as well.

Craig Cohen

Houston is, of course, a major metropolitan area, not a traditional college town. But many college towns do have off campus areas thought of as campus towns with businesses and restaurants and stores and the like which cater to that student population. Would you like to see some sort of campus town atmosphere develop adjacent to the university's main campus?

Renu Khator

You can see it's starting to develop already. There are many developments that are coming around the university, and more retail will come if we have more people here. Our stadium, other than having games, will also host a lot of events throughout the year, and I think that will help the retail industry too. But if you think about it, if cities don't have the richness that Houston has you may have to do something of a different type. Houston has incredible richness. Once we get light rail for our students downtown it will be just one ride away, and we plan to promote heavily for our students to really take advantage of that. Just go to downtown to all the museums, the clubs, the museum district. All of them become in their background. I don't want to limit by thinking that we need to have something right there next to the campus. I just want our students to embrace and be part of Houston and see the unique thing that Houston offers them, and I think that would be a great selling point for us to bring students from all over the state as well as all over the country.

Craig Cohen

Renu Khator is the chancellor of the University of Houston system and president of the University of Houston. President Khator, thanks so much for talking with us. We appreciate it.

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Renu Khator

Thank you very much. It's been great, and I appreciate and thank all the supporters, faculty, staff, students, alumni, everybody for their support in a great university.

Craig Cohen

Up next, a chart from the Pew Research Center suggests Houston is more conservative than Dallas. Surprised? We discuss how greater Houston skews politically and which areas of town have shifted on which issues. Stay with us as Houston Matters continues.

0:28:54.5 (end of audio)