



UH Khator Point of Order Ep. 8
March 2, 2021

[background music]

Evan Smith: 0:00:10 I'm Evan Smith in [The Texas Tribune](#), and this is Point of Order, a podcast about the ins and outs, the ups and downs, the people and politics and traditions of the 87th Texas Legislation. This week, [higher ed's gap year](#). I'm old enough to remember when the 2021 session was going to be all about higher education, just as the 2019 session was all about public education. So much for that, along with so much else, as we limp into month twelve of a public-health emergency and month three of a biennial convening of state lawmakers in which both the agenda and everyone's bandwidth are necessarily limited. That's not to say there isn't a real need to focus on the state's colleges and universities, which have been in their own way every bit as challenged as the public schools as they tend to our kids and grandkids, brothers and sisters, moms and dads, our future workforce, the future leaders of Texas, America, and the world. But it may have to wait until 2023 when all of this, presumably, will be behind us; when the firehose of calamity and catastrophe has reduced to a trickle and our boring old policy debates have returned to normal.

Seriously, who wouldn't kill for the most controversial topic on the docket to be approval of tuition revenue bonds? Let it be said that higher ed continues to grapple with the basics: access, affordability, and excellence, who can get in, and where—how to find a way to pay without drowning in debt, and what you get from all that money. Completion remains a problem. Fewer than one in four students who entered the 8th grade here earn a degree or certificate within six years of high school. And if they're Black or Hispanic, male or poor, the odds are even lower. Speaking of race, there are overdue conversations about equity and inclusion across all campuses at the moment and the need to better serve the underserved. And there are newer conversations about technology, made more urgent by two and a half semesters of, mostly, online classes, about the prospect of virtual learning hanging around as a component of higher ed post-pandemic, and how the digital and device divides threaten to widen the attainment gap. And still and ever there is football. Surely, you didn't think we were going to do a whole podcast about higher ed without talking about football.

This week's guest [Renu Khator](#) has been thinking strategically about these and other issues in Texas for thirteen years. That's the length of her tenure as chancellor of the University of Houston System and as president of its flagship campus, the University of Houston, whose student body of more than 47,000 is among the nation's most diverse. She had her hands full pre-Covid. They're even fuller post-snowvid, as she told me on the morning of Monday, March 1, day 49 of the 140.

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Evan Smith: 0:04:09 So, how is the campus two weeks after the storm? How much damage to buildings? How many students, faculty, and staff adversely affected? Do you have any sense of scope or magnitude?

Renu Khator: Yeah, it was really a very rough and tough time. And our buildings actually did quite well, but we did have damage. There were at least three buildings that would need some time to repair and get them back, but the good thing is that all the classrooms—we were able to get them back on Monday.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: However, it's really not the buildings where the greatest toll came from this storm; it's on the people. Seventy percent of our people suffered some kind of issues at their home or with—of course, with technology and continue to do so. We've been helping them. But just going through that kind of trauma. And I know on Tuesday morning, I tried to check with all my vice presidents and deans just how things were, and all but one had no power at that time.

Evan Smith: God—

Renu Khator: That could tell me what the scope was. I mean, we were just trying hard. I know so many were just standing in grocery-store parking lots, just trying to get connectivity. Some were just saying like, "I don't have much power, but I can just do with text." But it was really a rough time, but things are getting back to normal. Our students are extremely resilient, our faculty and staff—I don't even know how to compliment them and what to say about them because—I mean, look, one after another, we had Harvey, the pandemic, and now this, you know, winter storm. They have stood firm, they have stood tall, they have reached out to students. I mean, it is such a humbling experience to work with such a fine group of colleagues.

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Evan Smith: It really has been a hell of a year, president. Has it—like you didn't have enough to worry about. You mentioned the pandemic. I mean, you start out a year ago, and we're literally in the one-year week, I think, from the place where most people associate the beginning of this period. You go all the way back to that; then you come forward. The last time I interviewed you, which was a little more than four years ago, you mentioned to me that you're a Bridge player, and Bridge had taught you, "Don't complain about the hand you're dealt, just play your very best game," that's what you said. It's really hard not to complain about this bad hand, isn't it?

Renu Khator: 0:06:41 Yeah. I mean, you're right. I can believe it has been four years. Where have you been, Evan?

Evan Smith: (laughs)

Renu Khator: I mean, it's the only thing I've been thinking about in a year, but—

Evan Smith: Yes, I should be calling you every week, I agree.

Renu Khator: (laughs) No, not—

Evan Smith: We'll do that—but seriously, I mean, it is very difficult to keep, you know, a positive attitude about what's happened over the last year.

Renu Khator: Yes.

Evan Smith: And again, the storm on top of everything else, it's really a lot.

Renu Khator: Yes. No, I mean, I agree with you. I'm a Bridge player, and I always think about that, but here is the thing. During the times of crisis—I mean, leaders need to keep calm, and leaders need to give hope. They have to be transparent. They have to be on the point, and as good a communication as possible. However, at the same time, they have to keep calm and have to give hope. So, I mean, I get inspiration from my faculty. They are suffering so much at their homes, and yet, here they—you know, they get on, and they make calls. And same thing with the staff. I mean, they were there taking care of over 3,500 students living on campus during all of this storm. Of course, they were suffering in their personal life too. So, I guess you're right. We can complain, but complaining doesn't help, really. So I try to do what is possible, but my first and foremost goal is, "Okay, next step forward."

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Evan Smith: Yeah. Do you have a sense, president, of what exactly has been lost over the last twelve months? Big picture, can you quantify it? What kind of financial hit the University of Houston has taken? And what kind of mission hit have you taken in terms of your ability to do all the things that you are in business to do?

Renu Khator: 0:08:23 Right. Absolutely, sure. So, for the last year—which our year ended in August—so from March to August reached to—or the University of Houston—and I can tell you the system, too, but the University of Houston reached about 80 million dollars of hit.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: This is time, for this year, we are looking at about 100 million dollars hit. And, you know, a federal stimulus has, of course, helped. Our alumni and donors have helped, and—you know, our faculty and staff has helped. We've not been able to, obviously, give them any kind of raise or bonus, even though—I'll point out—they're teaching more students right now, and they're caring for more students right now than they were caring [for] pre-pandemic.

Evan Smith: Yes.

Renu Khator: So, you know, think about—you know, that's a hit. Now, that's financial. We'll make it through; we keep on pleading that the legislature to just keep in mind that—number one—that we have been continuing with our mission and with our work. But at the same time, how important this is going to be—the schools and education, general higher education, for the future of Texas. Now, in terms of mission, I can answer you two ways. One is our momentum and where we're going—we try not to take a hit there. Over a one-year period when—during the pandemic, our faculty and staff and all the alumni continue to work toward our next strategic plan because we had launched the process in January, and the pandemic hit in March.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: 0:10:04 We just unveiled it, and I don't—I mean, and you can probably see from that plan, and can see from all of the progress we have made in terms of record-breaking enrollment, record-breaking success in research grants, and finishing off the capital campaign that we really have tried to work very hard and not lose the momentum. However, there is an area where I do think that we have taken hit, but I think that all the students—I mean, higher ed or public education has taken hit, and that is the connectivity and people not being able to be together. There is a lot of horizontal

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learning that goes on campuses, just like in the schools. And I think that missing piece, building of networks, you know—you can do a whole lot of things online. You can continue, but the question is, to what extent can you be creative, you know, online? In some fields you can; in other fields, it's very difficult. I mean, look at the arts. You know, look at some of these fields, right?

So, I think that's where the maximum loss will be. But one more area, Evan—and if I just can take 30 seconds to point out—is those students who are generally—our prospective students—who are sitting on the fence thinking, "Is college for me?" They just have so much going on in their lives. And I just think, for them, some of them may have made the decision, "Oh, I can't handle all of this." I don't blame them, but the thing is that's probably—we need to do more work to make sure that they don't lose out. That one year of loss—we have to figure out how to help them have the confidence, have the persistence, have the courage to go forward because otherwise, that would be a loss for many, many, many years of—

Evan Smith: Yeah. I want to come to those students because there have been surveys that have shown that, generally speaking, there are a number of kids who've changed their plans since the pandemic hit about what they're going to do after high school. And in particular, in communities of color, and you have a very diverse institution. So you have a high percentage of your students who maybe come out of those communities. It's been particularly the case in those communities, but let me come back to that in a second. Let me stay with this question of online learning because, you know, there are a lot of people in higher ed and in public ed who will say, "Well, yes, online learning is not the same, but it's really good, and we can really accomplish a lot." The fact is that, for a lot of kids, it's never going to be the same. It's not just the social aspect of being on campus, but just as a means to educate your students; it just doesn't do the trick. So, I want to ask you specifically about that. Do you think this has been a setback in terms of your ability to educate? Has online learning, at the end of the day, done the trick, or has it been insufficient?

Renu Khator: 0:12:56 You know, this is the time when all of us were thrown into this experimentation, right? I mean, 20% of the faculty had ever taught online.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: And for us, you know, 50% of the students had ever taken a course. But now, all the faculty had to teach. So, yes, we struggled in March, April, and so on. By now—I mean, I visit at classes, and I have visited virtual classes. I mean, I've visited about 20 or so in fall; now—I've done about a dozen now. And what I hear from the students is that this is a good option, this is a good flexibility.

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Technology could be more integrated, but do they want it completely replaced by what they can get, the value-added on the campus? I don't think so. I mean, I go anywhere in Houston—I'm telling you, the students, they see me, they'll come running and just plead to me, "Please, please, please, bring face-to-face classes back." So, my—

Evan Smith: Right, yeah. They're telling you that they want to come back into class for sure. They want to come back.

Renu Khator: And faculty too. I mean, my husband is a professor, and I saw him, I watched him, and that's what gives me tremendous respect for faculty because I've watched firsthand how he struggled in March. His argument was, "Oh, there's no way—my course content! I cannot—you know—do it possibly online." And I watched him struggle, and watched him—you know, he spent so many hours. And you know, by now, he does a really, really good job, but if you ask him, "Are you going to be in classroom?" Every single time, he signed up for face-to-face class, in fall and—as well as in spring because—

Evan Smith: Yeah. Well, you said as president you visited—you said you visited about 20 classes in the fall, and now you're visiting classes—

Renu Khator: Yeah.

Evan Smith: Are the classes that you're sitting in on—and I realize you being in the class is a little bit of a disruptive thing, probably, for the experience. If you were not known to be in the class, it might go—I mean, who doesn't want to impress the president of the university, right? You want to do your very best work. But to the degree that this is a real example of what online learning is like, do you think to yourself, "I want to take this class. I get something out of this class. I want to—I'd learn in a class like this"? I mean, I just wonder if—is your reaction as a consumer—that this is a product you'd want to buy?

Renu Khator: 0:15:15 So first, let me tell you. I mean, I go to classes, I—you know, I ask them specifically, "Tell me how is your experience going." I want to hear good; I want to hear bad so that I can do it better, and I can help how I can, right?

Evan Smith: Right.

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Renu Khator: And think about it—yeah, students want to impress, probably, but this is also their opportunity to vent out and tell the president exactly what's not working. So I hear both sides of it.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: And we try to bring an improvement on it. Okay, now, in terms of your question about do I want to take online? Everything depends on pedagogy. Okay, in some classes, it really is quite effective; it does work. But in some classes, it just does not provide everything that the students need. Or sometimes, you could provide 50% of the content—is good, suitable—but the other 50%, you do need people to come together, work in a group, be creative, and feed off one other's energy. So my thinking is, right now, what is going to happen when we come out of pandemic, technology's going to be a lot more integrated. Rather than missing a class, if you have something else, the students will be able to join in online because we have 270 classes that are equipped now to do high-flex, and we intend to keep some of that flexibility. And I think some classes, sometimes, the students will take online. However, the entire thing, taking online—I think there's still something you miss out. And it's a good thing to establish network, know the teamwork because that's what the workplace is going to need. And you raise a very good question right here about students who need the most help. Are they the ones that are being left out? And that is one of the worries why we need to come back because we know we can drive the students from underprivileged groups to succeed, but we also know that it's harder work. It's more hand-holding. It's more personal contact. And that's what we pride on. We haven't lost enrollment from underprivileged groups. As a matter of fact, we have grown in terms of our diversity. So—and we have not lost the students during pandemic more than we would have ever lost before. Our assistance rates, graduation rates is all-high; dropout rate is low. And that's why I had started out saying that I give so much, so much credit to my faculty and staff.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: 0:17:42 I mean, we need to realize that—the heroes in some other spaces too, and these are my heroes.

Evan Smith: President, I know that everything you're saying is true and that you and your faculty and staff are doing everything you can. But, of course, some of this you don't control. One of the problems we've discovered over the last year is that many of the students you serve from communities of color or from low-income communities, regardless of race, don't have access to Wi-Fi, right? And so, one of the things that the legislature is taking up this session is, "Can we finally have a state broadband plan?" It's a little late because, really, it was during the pandemic that we saw where the digital divide created

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more haves and have nots. That surely has been a problem for you as well as everything has migrated online.

Renu Khator: Yes. I mean, we saw the problem in terms of not even having functioning laptops.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: And then we came up with 300 laptops so that we can, you know, hand them out to students for the semester. And then, we did see, too, that students really didn't have access to Wi-Fi.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: And so, that's a wake-up call, you know. I think anything we can do to strengthen our technological reach you know whether it's broadband, or whether it's—you know, their ability to have the equipment, I think that's going to serve us better; and we, probably, can't do without it, Evan.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: 0:19:04 Because technology's going to be a very integral part from now on, much, much, much more so than we ever thought possible.

Evan Smith: How are you going to quantify learning loss? You mentioned the thought that, you know, this year, potentially, is a setback for a lot of your students. We've heard a lot about learning loss in K-12. And I have to believe you have your own version of that. Plus, you inherit the learning loss in K-12, right? There's always a discussion of if the public education system doesn't do a good enough job, kids show up on your doorstep in need of remediation. I have to believe that this is going to create further challenges for you as kids do get to your campuses, having been through this period of—whatever it is—a year and a half. You may have more of a need to work with some of your incoming students on their own learning loss from K-12.

Renu Khator: Right. And this is a conversation going on at a national level among presidents as to what to expect now over the next few years and how to prepare to even be stronger in our outreach and in our services and networks to be able to support the students. And not to mention, we've seen now—and we're going to see it for the next few years—all of the issues related to mental health as well. I mean—and it's not just mental health in terms of students. I'm telling you, I've seen faculty and staff all being very stressed and burdened. But again, either we can just sit here in despair, or we can say,

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"Okay, let's just prepare and see what we can do. Let's stay flexible and also compassionate, and do our very best."

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: And I definitely intend to play our very best hand here—in this game of Bridge here.

Evan Smith: So, you said that your enrollment is not down, correct? You've actually been able to keep your enrollment. How are you thinking about admissions going forward? I mean, I know, for instance, that a number of the big universities, the University of Texas—most recently last week, but surely not alone—has decided to extend the test-optional policy for another year. In fact, I believe UT said, specifically, they're not going to require the SAT and the ACT for the next class, at least. Are you doing the same? And what other acknowledgments of this awful year will alter your admissions process?

Renu Khator: 0:21:22 Right. I think it's quite likely that we might end up doing that. We have not made that decision. I will go through all the process to do so. But at the same time, we are also studying just to see what happened to students when we took them without ACT or SAT. And did it make any difference? Because the empirical data is going to guide us for the future. We need something of that, or maybe we need some other mechanism for admission; and this is, again, a national conversation.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: And I think it makes sense at this point to reset the button and try to see what makes sense for us to predict who is going to be successful at college with all of the help and all of the services and all of the things needed because you do need aptitude, and you do need to have the desire and willpower, you know, to succeed yourself as well.

Evan Smith: And we talked earlier about the communities of color potentially being at risk as entering students, right? This is a challenge. You have a high percentage of Black and Hispanic students at the University of Houston. I think, together, it's approaching 40% of your enrollment if I'm reading the numbers correctly. And it is in these communities specifically that the surveys have shown this year has been a particular challenge and that there are a high percentage of students in communities of color who are considering changing whatever their plans were after high school because of the pandemic. I mean, it seems to me that one thing you could do conceivably—you and other public university systems and public university campuses—is lower the obstacles to getting in. And I guess that, at least, gets in part to the question of admissions, whether you're willing to give everybody a fulligan year as

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they say on the golf course, right? Just say, "Okay, we know this was a difficult year, maybe you don't have exactly what we're looking for typically in a student, but we understand the importance of giving you an opportunity—in this moment especially."

Renu Khator: I mean, both sides of the coin are there. And, of course—you know, using some kind of criteria for the students to come in—we can't just open because you need to see their preparation level and what you will add to that.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: 0:23:40 I'm not saying it's not our responsibility, but we have to see what we can actuate to make sure a student is successful because the last thing you want is a student to come in and, basically, leave it there with the diploma failure. That, to me, is not acceptable. So—

Evan Smith: In fact, the admission piece, president, is really the first part of it, right? That's the beginning of the conversation.

Renu Khator: It is.

Evan Smith: You get them in, but then you've got to keep them in, you have to do retention, you have to do counseling, you have to actually get them through the pipe, and that's a hard thing as well.

Renu Khator: Right. Both are equally hard. I just don't want the students to be sitting on a fence. And if anybody's listening, I would simply say, "Just don't give up. At least, take a look at it." Sometimes I hear, "I can't afford it." And you know, we have overpromised, which is, you know, families up to 65,000—those that are FAFSA eligible or TASFA eligible—we give them free tuition and fees. And up to 125,000, we give guaranteed assistance. So, we are trying—but I just want to make sure they won't just give up, you know. At least, try.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: And let's see that is possible to succeed. I'm worried about those who are sitting on the fence and saying, "Is it for me or is not for me?" It may not be for you, but at least make sure that you don't let your dreams go away. But then, Evan—as you said—once we get them, it's now much harder work because those who were with us, they have lost a year of network also. As well as those who are

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coming in new, we have to get them into the college culture and the college education and all of those things that come with it. So, there is a harder work ahead for us.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: 0:25:19 And that is why I keep making my plea to the legislature. This is actually trying to invest in higher education in a bigger way and not really make it harder for the students to go through the pipeline. Whatever we can do us together—I'm not resolving ourselves from the responsibility, but it's going to take a village for us to get over this and come out stronger than—

Evan Smith: Right. Let's talk about—I'm glad you brought the legislature up because I want to move the conversation to the legislature and your—you know, your agenda for this session and how you want to work together with legislators and what you're hearing from them. You presented your plan to the [senate finance committee](#) last week to be a top-50 public university. This has always been a conundrum, as you know, president, for Texas higher ed. As a state, our brand is that we want to be first and best at everything, but we find ourselves, in the case of our public universities, consistently lagging behind our peers. Well, I remember [Greg Abbott](#) say, before he was sworn in as governor in 2015, that five of the ten public universities in the country are in California, none are from Texas. And he wanted to begin the process of elevating some of Texas' elite universities into the top-10 nationally, but that hasn't happened. We're now—wherever we are now, six years later. Why do you think that is that we're still talking about it and talking about, but not actually meeting our words with action?

Renu Khator: Well, Evan, it's not an overnight switch that you become from here to there, you know.

Evan Smith: All right, but we're talking about six years, president.

Renu Khator: Okay, so—

Evan Smith: I mean, it would be one thing if this were 2016, right?

Renu Khator: Right. So, let me tell you, in six years, you know, for us—I mean, six, I don't know how much we've grown in six. But in the last ten years, we have gone from being ranked 125th in public universities or 127th, somewhere there, to now 87th rank among all public universities in the nation.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

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Renu Khator: 0:27:22 So, can we get to 50? Yeah. But the question here is, what is it that we need to do? And we have done thorough analyses, all of the patterns. Where we are right now? Point A. What is it going to take us to get to point B? And you know, the things that are extremely important for us is continuous focus on our students to succeed. The areas where we need to make improvement is affordability for our students, is their success in terms of their graduation, their mobility, and a social mobility for our students, and what happens to them after they graduate. Now, all of these things, I feel very good about committing for them because I know [that] if we commit to that—that's our core mission—we're going to succeed in other things. Now, other areas is really raising our national reputation. You do that by having your students succeed, but then you also do that by having research that is meaningful, that makes sense. And so for us, I think that goal makes it really a focused attempt. And I do think [that] with some help we can definitely get there. So, to say that we haven't moved—we meaning higher-education system institutions, haven't moved in six years isn't really true. We just haven't gotten to that finish line yet. I mean, with help, we can do that. I mean, you realize, the two institutions that are in AAU or that are in the top ones actually get a lot of extra funding through puff money, right? So you do realize that.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: It takes resources. It takes vision. It takes leadership and commitment. I'm telling you, we've got the commitment. Our faculty and staff have shown their leadership. The city, and the alumni here, we have the momentum. If we can get just a little bit of help—I'm not teaching all, so don't at all think in any way that I'm pointing to puff money or anything. It doesn't matter to me what color the resource is. All I'm saying is with just a little bit of help, we can put this university in position to where it should be for the fourth larger city in the United States; but also for the bigger economic center in the state of Texas.

Evan Smith: Right, right. And what exactly from the legislature would enable you to realize this vision for a top-50 University? What are you asking for specifically from them? Because again, this is a session in which even before the electric grid effectively collapsed on us, there was going to be limited bandwidth among people in the building. It's a weird session, right? People aren't really there. The public and others are limited in their access to the building. The agenda is going to be much more narrowly focused on the tasks at hand. It was already going to be difficult. It's more difficult as a result of the last two weeks. So, realistically, what is it that you expect from the—?

Renu Khator: 0:30:21 So—and I understand that. I mean, I know our senators. I know our house members. And I tell you—I mean, that is one of the privileges of this job. You get to meet some of

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these wonderful people, you know, who really want to do the right thing. And I understand their—you know, struggle. But I think for all of the higher educations, not just for the University of Houston's system. It's just important to keep in mind that this is time for investment. So, funding formula is, of course, everybody's bread and butter; it is important for every single institution. Now, we used to have, in 2010-11, funding formula for a student credit hour at \$62.19. By this time, it's \$54.00 for a student credit hour, and there's been so much of inflation. If you think about that, it's like 230 million-dollar loss by—this bi—biennium for us.

Evan Smith: It's really a cut, isn't it, president? It's a cut.

Renu Khator: Yes, it is like a cut, but that's not what we need to be thinking about, complaining. For us, I can tell you, we can help Houston's economy. We can—we are looking at things that are more value-added than just saying, "Okay, help the University of Houston." Right now, energy industry is in the middle of energy transition. I have this energy advisory board. They are constantly—for five years they have been talking, and five years ago, we started accumulating. What they said was going to be the need, which is energy transition, low-carbon, you know, reduction for oil and gas so that, you know, you can have what we have right now. Because we know there's going to be dependence on oil and gas for quite several decades. And how do you reduce the carbon footprints. So, we have accumulated a lot of talent. We are asking the state to help us in that area by having a carbon hub at the University of Houston. We're working at the federal level too. So this is how I think this could be an investment in the community. Of course, we are requesting—just making sure the funding formula and the Texas grants—you mentioned about the students from underprivileged communities.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: Texas grants, they are so important. They're an important piece of our work. And I just want to make sure that can be protected.

Evan Smith: Well, you know that our higher-ed commissioner, [Mr. Harrison Keller](#), apparently, has been saying that he's concerned about potential cuts to financial aid this session. It sounds like you are also. A cut to financial aids would be a problem for you.

Renu Khator: 0:32:51 It definitely will be, and there's no doubt about it. And, you know—so, basically—and I'm not asking just for University of Houston, I'm pleading on behalf of all of our institutions because you see what an important job they all have done, particularly in terms of—I'm sorry, I just get emotional and excited. Anyway, in terms of research and trying to help with pandemic,

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and trying to help with, you know, now wanting to get back into the game and help the economy. I mean, Houston's agenda from all of the institutions—I mean, it's quite rich and quite inspiring. And I think we have great partnership in the legislature, with the governor, lieutenant governor, our legislators. And I think we have positioned it right—Greater Houston partnership here is also consistent with our agenda.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: And I'm really very optimistic, too, and I know that our leaders in Austin will do whatever is possible to make this investment.

Evan Smith: Does the funding question, president, change as a consequence of the pandemic? I'm thinking about the ways in which the after will be different from the before. When you come back to campus after the pandemic has largely passed us by, you're not going to do things exactly the way that you did them before. I'll give you an example of this. So, my understanding is that the University of Houston wants 20 million dollars for a new law center and for the hobby building. Do I have that number right?

Renu Khator: The number changes, so I don't know—(laughs)—what number you have right now. But that is to—

Evan Smith: But some number of millions, right?

Renu Khator: Yes.

Evan Smith: You have some number of millions you requested for a new law center and for a hobby building.

Renu Khator: Right, right.

Evan Smith: My understanding is that there was some skepticism among finance committee members this last week about why they should be allocating money for new buildings when not just you, but all presidents are saying that the future of higher ed is a more hybrid model in person and digital? Has the pandemic shifted the way you're thinking about how you'd use new buildings in a new era of instruction? To me, that's the question for legislators and for you. [It] is does the funding model for

higher ed really meet the particular moment we're in given all the changes that are likely to take place?

Renu Khator: 0:35:08 Right. And it's a great question. So, yes, things will change. I mean, we have looked at all our capital projects and what we need to change because we can see, anticipate some changes coming. But I can tell you one thing—two things. One is the space deficit of our universities even pre-pandemic was so huge. I mean, it really was that there was just too much right there. So, it's not like we were at level, and therefore, you don't need to invest anymore if things shift. So that's one thing. And second thing is, think about construction, sometimes, also is a helpful tool to rebuild the economy. So, when I give my testimony, I basically said, "If that becomes a tool the legislature is thinking about to spur the economy, I at least want to know what is mostly needed on campus." Now, that is from the last biennium, where we had requested for hobby school and for law center, and we weren't funded for that much. So, that—what you mention—is that piece. But what we would like to get TRBs also is actually a concept—whole concept of an idea lab, which is n innovative space. I mean, we have number one rank entrepreneurship program; we have got Tech Bridge, and there is so much need to expose more students—not just for students a one program—to the possibilities of the world about start-ups. So, how do you be creative and how to promote their—how to applaud their creativity. So, the whole idea of this idea lab would be to give the students that space where they can come, and they can create, they can experiment with their ideas. And I think that's what is going to be the future. So, all types of things will change. I don't think we're going to be building any more parking lots—I mean, parking garages. However, we're going to be needing more collaborative spaces. The hunger and the deficit for space is still there. So, let's not dismiss that, but any investment in technology is also going to help hugely our institution.

Evan Smith: As you said earlier, the reality is that—you know, you said that there were a lot of students who didn't have devices, right? I mean, there's a digital divide, and it's a device divide. And if you have communities that don't have access to adequate devices to take advantage of online classes, it seems to me that the legislature could put up some money to ensure that every kid has adequate technology. I mean, that seems like a relatively small expense compared to some of these buildings.

Renu Khator: 0:37:45 Yeah. Well, I'm sure they'll do what is necessary. And their needs are different in different places, you know.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: Maybe everybody has different kinds of institutions, but yes, for sure. The bottom line is our ability to help our students, get them to college and get them to finish college because that's the future for Texas.

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator: So, whatever it takes there would be helpful. But also not to forget about the research thing because there are so much autonomous research going on in health institutions, in academic institutions. We've realized how much of that is needed and necessary now as we went into the pandemic.

Evan Smith: Right, right.

Renu Khator: So I think we were lucky. We have so many fine institutions, you know. It's really—Texas is a good place. I think our revenue estimate was more positive before, of course, the storm than it was. We'll see where it goes.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: I trust—I mean, I know our leaders there, they understand. And all we have to do is just keep on giving them better tools and better cases so that, you know, they can do their job there.

Evan Smith: There's been a discussion over the last couple of sessions about the level of tuition charged by universities like yours, president. There's a feeling on campuses that, you know, you're being asked to do a lot. Legislature tends to balk at—you know, saying grace over—although it's not their decision, but essentially saying grace over increases—even modest increases in tuition. Is your sense that coming out of an economic downturn that has really shown our economy to be mortal over the last year—in a way that it maybe wasn't mortal over the previous economic downturns. Is your sense that you have to keep tuition where it is? Right? I mean, I know there's always a price versus cost versus value conversation. It's difficult to have that at this moment, isn't it?

Renu Khator: 0:39:40 Right. We don't know where that conversation will go, but I can tell you this much that we passed that [Cougar Promise](#) in February, and the pandemic hit in March. And in February, the board said that we are making education free for students who are coming from families of 65,000 or less, right?

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Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: And again, keep assistance for up to 125,000 because we want to make sure people realize that it's affordable. And that's what public universities are supposed to do. Pandemic hit a month later. We could have said, "We're going to delay it." But no, that's our commitment.

Evan Smith: Good.

Renu Khator: That was something—affordability's extremely important for us. And, Evan, it's one of the criteria of our reaching top-50 also. So, we have to look at both sides. We make every tuition decision with a lot of pain and a lot of thinking, and then we try to help in so many different ways. But you should also realize, the students need—support system is also expending quite significantly. I mean, we didn't have to take—you know, ever think about hunger issues. Well, now, we have Cougar Pantry for students who may be struggling with that. We have Cougar Experience, which is for students to be able to stay in dorms, and that scholarship also comes—we didn't do those kinds of things before. I mean, there are so many different things that we have expanded. And mental health, let's not forget about that. That need is not going away any time soon. But at the end of the day, if we don't plant the seed, how are we going to get the fruit? And this is—the investment in higher education is like planting seeds. Right now, we need to do this so that economy can get better, workforce is prepared—

Evan Smith: Right.

Renu Khator:—we can attract good industry, and the economy can really boost itself.

Evan Smith: You're making the case, though; you're making the case. Again, if the tuition door's largely closed here, you're making the case for why the legislature has to step up. Because otherwise, you're back out into the community shaking your cup in front of donors, which you'll do anyway, but it just—you know, in order for the math to work, the source of revenue has to come from somebody. And it may very well be that it's the case you make at the legislature that—

Renu Khator: 0:42:02 And I don't want to sound like legislature isn't doing anything because—as I have been saying—I mean, there are so many programs from the legislature that help us, you know.

Evan Smith: Right.

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Renu Khator: I can count so many of them that—

Evan Smith: Yeah. But it's important that even in this difficult session, it sounds like—that they just keep it up.

Renu Khator: Yes. And it's important for us to also look at every expenditure. I mean, we have saved right now, during the pandemic—I mean, we just cut down all of the expenditures, every kind of thing. I mean, you should see—I mean, we saved about 50 million dollars through just the expenditure reduction because we didn't do a lot of things that you would do in a normal campus also.

Evan Smith: Yeah. Will you be back in class in person this fall, do you think?

Renu Khator: That is our plan A, which is we will be back. But you know, we have always had to keep a flexibility there. When we started with the pandemic, we put two principles out there. One was flexibility, and one was compassion. We're not jeopardizing—you know, the health of our students—the safety or health of students or the faculty and staff. So right now—

Evan Smith: So, you're not guaranteeing. Now see, president, I actually would have assumed with the prevalence of the vaccine and the way that the virus is going that by September, I would have imagined that you'd be able to say with confidence, "We're going to be back."

Renu Khator: 0:43:21 Can you guarantee, Evan, that there won't be another strain, you know, some kind of strain coming, or there would not be another outbreak? I mean, we don't know. I am assuming all the optimistic things, all the best predictions. And given all of that, I think we are going face-to-face because our faculty wants it, our students want it.

Evan Smith: Yeah. Are you requiring vaccines for students or faculty? Or are you attempting to figure out how the vaccine conversation can be part of the equation for you?

Renu Khator: Well, we're not requiring, but we don't even have vaccine available. I mean, we've got for our campus, you know, 1,000 vaccines. And we're giving them with the guidelines from the state and the CDC. And we have some vaccines come to our student health center. I just hope we can get more vaccines available. And I think we will be having a very different level of confidence in what the fall will look [like], not just on campus but in society. Probably, by the end of June, that's what I'm hoping.

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Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: But I can see the hunger, and I can see the need for people to get back out into normalcy. And that's what we're preparing for too.

Evan Smith: Right. What about football? Will you have a full house for the first home game of the year? And what are the considerations in your mind?

Renu Khator: I would love to do that, you know. But just because I would love to do that doesn't mean it can happen. So, we'll just watch very carefully, and we'll take CDC guidelines, Texas State. We'll also look at what's happening in the city and the community. And I certainly hope so. I mean, why football? I mean, let's talk about basketball right now. Aren't we doing great with basketball?

Evan Smith: I do expect that you expect that you're going to have a good couple of weeks coming up, right? I think you were number 12, rank number 12, the last time I saw.

Renu Khator: 0:45:05 I know. I certainly hope so. We beat the USF yesterday pretty bad, so I hope we'll do better, and I hope we have a good season. I mean, I don't know about anybody else, but when I'm watching sports, it gives me for—at least, that time period—a little bit more sense of normalcy.

Evan Smith: Yeah.

Renu Khator: I mean, that's something different. But we, of course, have to keep our student-athletes very safe. And that has been our mission at [NCAA](#) because I serve on that board too.

Evan Smith: Well—yeah, I'm reminded that you're on the—and we'll wrap up here in a second—I'm reminded that you're on the NCAA board and have been for several years. Generally speaking, you think college sports has done a good job over this last year trying to preserve as much of college sports as it can while keeping people safe? Speaking of balances, this seems like a pretty big balance.

Renu Khator: Yeah. And I can tell you, we have spent hours, and hours, and hours. And nobody can tell me that NCAA didn't consider the safety and health of their students. We did. I mean—and I would say, overall, given the circumstances, we treated it quite well. And we closed, we shut down the championship for basketball last year when it just—everything was so unpredictable—we didn't know what we were facing with—and opened up slowly as things got a little bit better. And some schools

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have done a better job, and some schools have not. But anytime there was an issue—and I think the team set out—I would say, overall, yes, given the circumstances.

Evan Smith: Right. All right, last question. And I'm going to give you a free shot here, president. The last time I interviewed you, it was right around the time UT hired Tom Hermann—away from UofH.

Renu Khator: Okay.

Evan Smith: You were gracious, then. How do you feel about the way things worked out? Be as snarky as you want because, of course, nobody listens to this podcast.

Renu Khator: Why should I be snarky? I'm always happy for other institutions too. But, you know, here's the thing: I don't spend my time looking over my shoulder for the past, you know. I'm happy for whatever works out for anybody. I am focused on where we are, and I'm certainly hoping we'll have a great football season. It's about time now.

[music starts]

Evan Smith: You've been listening to Point of Order, a proud member of the Texas Tribune's family of podcasts. Thanks to our guest Renu Khator, and thanks to the sponsors of this episode: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Greater Texas Foundation, the Trellis Foundation, Cengage, Locke Lord, and Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Texas. Be sure to check out the Tribune's deep coverage of the 87th legislative session at texastribune.org. And if you like what you see there or hear here, tell your friends about us. Until next time, I'm Evan Smith.

[music ends]

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