

Job One? Tier 1

It's tough slogging, but keeping Austin focused on UH process is vital to Houston.

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It can't be much fun being a leader of one of the seven Texas public universities chasing funding from the Texas Legislature to achieve higher education's version of nirvana — Tier 1 status.

It's been hot. There's no money in Austin. And state lawmakers aren't in a generous, giving mood.

So, our sympathies to all concerned, but especially to UH Chancellor and President Renu Khator, the leader of our home team in this high-stakes game. It's tough slogging.

Tier 1 status is important. It means being numbered among the nation's top research universities. Tier 1 institutions are centers for scholarly innovation, cutting edge research and federal and private funding.

For some time now, state leadership has recognized the need to perhaps double the number of Tier 1 institutions in Texas. Alas, that's a process that can - and likely will - take years.

For UH and Houston, it's important to keep the momentum building. Achieving Tier 1 status for UH may be the single most consequential step we can take to ensure a prosperous future for this region. To glimpse the possibilities, one need only look at what UT has done for Austin over the years. Tier 1 status for UT has helped shape Austin into a magnet for high-tech industry and the high-paying jobs and healthy tax base that come with that. We'd like a helping of that in Houston, too, thank you. Bringing UH into the Tier 1 ranks is the surest way there.

Currently, Texas has three Tier 1 universities: UT-Austin, Texas A&M and Rice. That's not enough. By comparison, California has nine. In addition to UH, the schools vying for Tier 1 status are the University of Texas campuses in San Antonio, El Paso, Arlington and Dallas; North Texas State University and Texas Tech.

But back to the present, and the situation in Austin. We know that it doesn't make things any easier for Chancellor Khator when she's pleading the UH case that the state government faces a projected biennial budget deficit in the range of \$18 billion. Khator and others got a full dose of that last month on their visit to the capital, where they appeared before a joint meeting of the Senate and House Higher Education committees.

The immediate problem they all face is a cut in state matching funds to help the seven candidates for Tier 1 status achieve it. It's just a little nick - a reduction from \$50 million to \$47.5 million in that pot - but every dollar counts. The university presidents and chancellors ought not be shy about making that case with the lawmakers. This goes double for UH.

Any expansion of Tier 1 institutions in Texas simply must include the University of Houston. The future vitality of the area's economy, the state's largest and most dynamic, depends in so many ways on UH being able to take that big step (see above).

So soldier on, Chancellor Khator - heat or no heat, budget deficit or not. We're with you all the way. Truth is, we're counting on you.