



## WITH A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

In late 2011, *The Bulletin* had the opportunity to interview Renu Khator, president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the University of Houston System. Khator is the University of Houston System's first woman chancellor and the first Indian immigrant to head a comprehensive research university in the United States. She assumed her post in January 2008 and oversees an organization that serves more than 66,000 students, has a budget that exceeds \$1.3 billion, and has a \$3.5-billion economic impact on the Greater Houston area each year. Khator received her bachelor's degree from Kanpur University in India and both her master's and doctoral degrees from Purdue University. *The Bulletin* asked Khator about what it is like to be a university president and how college union and student activities professionals can build relationships with senior campus administrators.

**BULLETIN:** How might students describe the role of the university president?

**KHATOR:** First and foremost, I would hope students see their university president as their advocate—someone who is always looking out for their interests—because I believe that is a university president’s No. 1 priority. And that is true in my case. Whether I am in Austin presenting the university’s case for funding before members of the Texas legislature, or greeting a room full of potential donors, or meeting with the CEO of a company who employs our graduates, students are first in my mind.

A university president, besides representing his or her university before all constituencies—external and internal—must also be a leader. In both times of success or in challenging times, a university president’s words inform all decisions, offer guidance, set the general direction, and inspire the students, faculty, and staff. In the end, when all is said and done, a university president is accountable for supporting the university’s mission, helping it achieve its strategic goals, ensuring the success of the university’s functions and operations, and—most important—the academic success of the students.

**BULLETIN:** What misconceptions do you think staff have about university presidents? What about students?



**KHATOR:** Certainly, university presidents have great influence over all aspects of a university. However, from time to time, students and staff need to understand that due to the strategic nature of a president’s role, they must remain focused on the big picture. In my case, as much as I would like to implement every idea I receive, I am often unable to—not out of apathy, but simply due to time and resource restraints.

**BULLETIN:** What memories do you have about university center and student activities from your time as a college student?

**KHATOR:** I did not have one at my undergraduate university, but at Purdue, it was the center of my student life.

**BULLETIN:** What is the role of the university center and student activities in fulfilling the mission of an institution?

**KHATOR:** It’s common knowledge in higher education that the more involved students are, the more likely they are to succeed academically and graduate. ... This means continually enhancing what’s already in place to provide our students with the environment that helps them stay in school and graduate in a timely manner.



**BULLETIN:** What would you say university presidents need from college union and student activities personnel?

**KHATOR:** Above all else, a team orientation. At the University of Houston, we have thousands of faculty and staff, and we are all working together with a common purpose and goal—student success. It is important all of us see ourselves as part of a larger whole. Departments in student affairs specifically create a comprehensive campus life experience, more so than any other area on campus. Through a focus on current student development theory and learning outcomes, student affairs areas are able to contribute effectively to the needs of the institution.

Solid administrative practices also are needed. As gatekeepers of student fees, professional staff in student affairs must tend to fiduciary matters with the same diligence they give to student development. Coordination with contract partners, care and maintenance of facilities, and adherence to university purchasing standards are the foundation of a strong division of student affairs.

**BULLETIN:** In your role as president, how can union and activities staff make your life easier?

**KHATOR:** Advance planning is crucial. As much as I would like to—and I am sure my fellow university presidents across the nation feel the same way—my schedule sadly does not allow me to attend every student event on campus. That is why it is so important for students to work through the staff. The staff can then assist me by communicating the students' needs well in advance, so I am better prepared and can prioritize so that I can remain involved in all aspects of campus life.

**BULLETIN:** How can student affairs professionals improve relationships with their university presidents?

**KHATOR:** Through communication. Before a university president can commend the staff on their success, a president must know what they are doing successfully. Too often a university president only finds out about things when they go wrong. Staff

should not be shy to tell the entire university community—including the president—good news when it happens. By doing this, a university president will learn more about the university center and student affairs operations, but perhaps more important, about the individuals who are responsible for the success of their units—the “unsung heroes.”

**BULLETIN:** With the increased focus on accountability and increased competition for university dollars, how can college union and student activities professionals better position themselves for success?

**KHATOR:** There is no substitute for hard quantitative data on the impact your programs are making on the overall goal of student success. Academic and research functions can pull comprehensive data showing the effectiveness of their programs—grades, graduation rates, grant dollars, and so on. It is important that university center and student activities professionals make a concerted effort to focus on assessment, so they can present their case on a level playing field with their colleagues in other departments and divisions across campus.

**BULLETIN:** What do you think college union professionals will need to do differently in the future?

**KHATOR:** Campuses today are more diverse than ever, and our continued success hinges on all students—of all races, ages, backgrounds, and creeds—knowing they are part of a larger, shared community. University centers are no longer just places to buy books or eat lunch—they are the hub of campus life.

With that said, today's student also is more “plugged in” than ever before. Social media innovations like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly popular. To be successful, traditional student affairs functions cannot simply wait for students to approach them—they must proactively reach out via the platforms students use most. We also must remember that, as easy as it is to make digital connections today, student affairs professionals need to help students make human connections. **BULLETIN**