

UH AT 85

By Joe Pratt

I first visited the University of Houston in the early 1960s, meaning that I have watched the current campus evolve for almost two-thirds of its existence. I have taught here for twenty-seven years, or almost one-third of UH's history. I have drawn on personal observations as well as published accounts to write this introductory overview of the first eighty-five years of the University's existence.¹ It provides context for the articles in this special issue of *Houston History* that is a collection of written snapshots, rather than a comprehensive history. It is fitting that the issue is a joint effort with the UH Alumni Association; more than at most universities, the history of UH has been shaped by its students.

This began even before the founding of the University. In 1926, a group of high school students nearing graduation met with E. E. Oberholtzer, then head of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), and asked for his help in creating an institution of higher learning where they might continue their educations. Plans for the junior college that was UH's predecessor then moved into high gear. From 282 students in its first undergraduate class of 1927, the University has grown to more than 40,000 students by the fall of 2012. With more dreams than dollars, UH has hustled to fulfill its central mission: providing a path to upward mobility for students from the booming Houston region and beyond. These students have gone on to play important roles in the building of Houston.

As an undergraduate at Rice in the late 1960s, I joined others in referring to UH as "Cougar High." This half joke, half insult reflected the University's earliest years as a junior college housed in HISD. Students attended night classes at San Jacinto High School taught by faculty members at times "borrowed" from other institutions. To offer day classes in the early 1930s, the school borrowed space from local churches. Despite such limitations, by 1934 its student body had more than tripled to about 900 and a four-year curriculum had been approved by state authorities and put into place. Clearly, Cougar High filled a pressing need by establishing a proud tradition of expanding educational opportunities for students who could not afford to go away to college.

Supporters of Houston's university responded by seeking better facilities, and the search began for a new campus location and the funding to construct its buildings. Help came from civic leaders in a city that recognized the benefits of a new university in the heart of Houston. After



The seal of the University of Houston stands near the front of the Ezekiel Cullen Auditorium, welcoming visitors to the UH campus on University Drive.

Photo by Alan Montgomery, Woodallen Photography.

a plan to locate the campus in Memorial Park collapsed, in 1936 Ben Taub and the J. J. Stettegast Estate donated 110 acres of largely undeveloped land southeast of downtown between St. Bernard Street (later renamed Cullen Boulevard) and Calhoun Road. Landscape architects and urban planners created a master plan for the future growth of the University. It embodied a series of quadrangles that could grow into a beautiful traditional university campus.

Supporters of the University of Houston found a benefactor worthy of their ambitions. Hugh Roy Cullen, a fifth grade drop-out who became a self-made millionaire oilman, embraced the idea of a "university for working men and women and their sons and daughters." He funded the first campus building, which was completed in 1939 and named in memory of his son, Roy Gustav Cullen.

This building introduced me to UH when I first came to the campus in 1964 for an Interscholastic League "ready writing" competition as a high school student. I spent three hours of a beautiful spring afternoon in Roy Cullen staring out the window while writing an essay on "Class Divisions in My Home Town." I lost the writing contest, but I won the day by walking around a real live college campus, visiting the Cougar Den, and standing in awe of both the interior and exterior of E. Cullen Auditorium, which my uncle had worked on in a construction gang. The campus Don Whitaker's article describes as "our country club" looked like fantasyland to a teenager from a refinery town. My visit to UH helped put me on the road to college.

After the war, the Cullen family emerged as a driving force in the development of the University of Houston into a



Classes for the Houston Junior College and the University of Houston originally met at San Jacinto High School, circa 1935.

All photos courtesy of Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries unless otherwise noted.

major university, supporting many of the key initiatives that shaped the evolution of the campus and the University as a whole. Then as now, the Cullens and other civic and business leaders understood that to grow into a major metropolis, Houston needed UH.

During the last years of the Great Depression, the University's enrollment already had reached about 2,000, and the campus had more than doubled in size with the additions of 250 more acres of land. Donations and government programs funded two more new buildings, but UH lacked the funding to move quickly forward with the master plan. Such concerns moved to the background with the coming of World War II, which brought new programs and new people to UH. The University created programs in the College of Community Services to train thousands of students to work in vital war industries and established training programs for both civilian and military pilots.

As it contributed to the war effort, the University also looked to its future by organizing its academic activities into six colleges and a graduate school. In the spring of 1945, UH had more than 3,000 students and about 100 faculty members. It had officially moved out of HISD with the creation of its own board of trustees, and E. E. Oberholtzer, its long-term leader, was named the first president of the University of Houston. UH seemed poised for a period of growth and consolidation.

Nothing could have prepared the University for the ambition and energy of the returning G.I.s who flooded the campus under the G.I. Bill of 1944. (See Betsy Morin's article on WWII veterans at UH.) Having lost years of their lives to war, these demanding students brought with them a sense of urgency. UH responded with the expansion of professional programs in engineering, business, law, education, nursing, and communications. (See KUHT-TV article by James Fisher.) The building boom that followed created a small university where a few buildings had stood. The master plan for the campus went into a file cabinet, and campus leaders chose rapid construction of new facilities over gradual and orderly expansion, meeting the needs of a city whose post-war boom was anything but orderly. A second sustained building boom remade the campus after UH became a state school in 1963. During this period, the University also

pledged one percent of future building costs to works of art to beautify the campus and raise its prestige. (See Debbie Harwell's article on the art collections.) Several more building booms have followed, with the current wave expanding facilities to meet the needs of a large research university, including dorms to attract more on-campus students.

The rapid expansion of UH fostered a distinctive entrepreneurial culture for faculty and students. Faculty members knew that if they wanted to develop better programs, they would have to find resources from inside and outside the University and supplement these resources with a healthy dose of their own "sweat capital." Students faced a similar situation. In a university dominated by commuter students and at times lacking adequate support services, ambitious students had to look after themselves. They balanced work, school, and often family demands while learning how to study in college and how to find a parking space. Successful students gained a level of maturity and toughness that proved valuable in the job market. (For profiles of some of these students, see Jeff Sutton's article.)

The enduring symbol for me of the maturity demanded of many UH students walked into my memory after my wife and I had taken our daughter to begin her freshman year at a small, Colorado liberal arts college, which had a week full of functions to welcome its new students. Returning home, I went to my office on Sunday morning to catch up on work. As I crossed the empty campus, I was surprised to see a young woman walking toward the library with a confused look on her face. I asked if I could help, and she explained in halting English that she had just arrived in Houston from Singapore to live with relatives in Sugarland and attend the University of Houston. On this, her first morning at UH, she had somehow managed to find the campus on public transportation—searching for much needed assistance on a day when the campus was closed. I helped her as much as I could. Driving home, I decided that she would either be back in Singapore in a week or become a highly successful graduate of UH. I like to imagine her today as a strong, confident UH alum making a difference somewhere in the world. I am pleased that our historically underfunded student services have improved significantly in the years since then.

Building the athletic programs that put UH on the map also required a form of entrepreneurship by a group of young coaches. Individuals like Bill Yeoman and Guy Lewis built nationally competitive programs from scratch with their intense commitment and a steady stream of good athletes from the Houston region—with an occasional recruit from Lagos, Nigeria. Like many, I first realized that UH was on the rise by following its highly visible sports programs in the 1960s. (Many standouts are mentioned in Debbie Harwell’s Hall of Honor article.) From high up in the Dome, I watched the Elvin Hayes-Don Chaney basketball team make history by defeating mighty UCLA. At the time, this outstanding team played many games in local high school gyms, since it lacked an on-campus facility. Later the football team moved into the Dome rather than the former high school stadium on campus. These Cougar teams broke new ground in racial desegregation in the region while also breaking into the national rankings.

UH students have always been economically diverse, with a healthy number of first-in-family college students and older students returning to college. But, as discussed in the article by Aimee L. Bachari and Ann Lynd, desegregation in the early 1960s accelerated the growth of ethnic and racial diversity. I have tracked the growing diversity of our student body for more than a quarter of a century through my students in the required American history survey classes. Year after year, I have entered Auditorium 1 of Agnes Arnold Hall to meet a new class of 300 to 500 students. Year after year, I have gazed out at my increasingly multicultural



Marguerite Ross Barnett came to UH in 1990 with great promise then died at age forty-nine before completing her second year as president.

students. As I teach classes and find ways to bring together students of all backgrounds, I believe more and more strongly in the benefits of student diversity in the classroom. One of the joys of teaching at UH has been the opportunity to learn from our students from around the region and the world while helping them learn from each other.

Gradually over the last three decades, UH has improved its buildings and its faculty to match the ambitions of its students and meet its own long-held aspirations. For me, the symbols of this pursuit of excellence have been the spectacular advances I have observed first hand in the Bauer College of Business and the Honors College. I attended the dedication of Melcher Hall during my first year on campus. Today I walk past a fine new auditorium and new offices and classrooms at the recently completed Cemo Hall and another building nearing completion. Generous donors helped pay for these new buildings while facilitating the addition of new faculty and the growing quality of our programs and students. I have watched a similar process of change give rise to an outstanding Honors College (as described in Keri Myrick’s article). I know that other programs with which I am less familiar also have greatly improved.

Since 1927, students, alums, faculty, administrators, and supporters have done much to lay the foundation for the recent surge of the University of Houston to Tier One status; much remains to be done. Our look back at the University’s history gives reason for optimism about its future. If I attend the UH centennial in 2027, I suspect that the buildings I first saw in the early 1960s will be hard to find on the sprawling campus. The quality of programs will no doubt be higher than when I joined the faculty in 1986. Faculty and students will be even more diverse, more international. The University of Houston will have moved higher in the ranks of research universities than it stands today. Amid these changes, one thing will be the same as it was in 1927: UH will still be a door through which students walk to find choices in life.

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Hugh Roy Cullen, who along with his wife Lillie Cranz Cullen were the University’s first major benefactors, stands by the bas relief of his grandfather, Ezekiel W. Cullen, in the building’s lobby. Ezekiel Cullen is considered the “father” of education in Texas, having introduced legislation when Texas was a republic that set aside land for the establishment of public colleges and schools.