

Houston: The City and the University, The Allure and the Promise

By Renu Khator

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When I was first contacted about the presidency of the University of Houston, back in 2007, I immediately started searching online to learn about the University, the city that shares its name, and the great state they both call home.

I knew of the Alamo, of course, and the fact that Texas had been an independent republic, and that two recent U.S. presidents had lived in Houston — one of them to this day. I also knew of NASA and the Johnson Space Center — after all, who can forget that “Houston” was the first word uttered by a human from another celestial body? I knew that Houston was famous for its spirit of entrepreneurship. And I remembered the skyscrapers and urban sprawl I saw when I visited the city more than ten years ago for a wedding.

But what I found online intrigued and amazed me. It also started me thinking that, after 22 years at the University of South Florida, and after occasional calls from headhunters on behalf of prestigious universities across the country — overtures that I rejected — Houston was where I wanted to write the next chapter of my career.

I found that Houston is an international city of the first order, with 94 consular offices and 22% of its population foreign-born. I found that Houston is third in the nation in number of “Fortune 500” companies located within its metropolitan area. And I found that, remarkably, if Houston were an independent nation, it would be the world’s 30th largest economy based on its annual gross product of more than \$325 billion.

I found that Houston was home to the Texas Medical Center, the largest in the world, home to the Port of Houston, first in the nation in volume of foreign tonnage, and of course, that Houston was the “energy capital” of the world. And I also found that Houston is one of only four

U.S. cities with resident companies in all four of the major performing arts — symphony, opera, drama, and ballet.

Those many hours of online research also gave me a good insight into the University of Houston and the UH System, of which UH is the largest component.

I found that the University of Houston mirrored the demographics of the city. Not only is UH one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the nation, but probably the most ethnically balanced as well.

I found that the University of Houston excelled in many academic programs and areas of research — from creative writing to nanotechnology, from intellectual property law to chemical engineering, and from superconductivity to the ambitious Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Heritage project.

And I found that University of Houston faculty and staff members included a Nobel Laureate, and winners of Tony, Pulitzer, and Emmy awards.

In the end, what inspired me to come to Houston to be interviewed by the presidential search committee was the question I had in my head — “Why, given all the assets and resources around it, isn’t the University of Houston a nationally competitive university?” To achieve that goal was a once-in-a-lifetime challenge I risked taking, and an opportunity I could not ignore.

The ideas I brought to the interview, the plans and strategies I hoped to implement and the vision I had to elevate UH to its rightful place among the nation’s top universities were exactly what the search committee and the Board of Regents were looking for — eight hours after arriving in Houston, I was offered the job, and I accepted it.

Today, a few months shy of my fifth anniversary as President and Chancellor, I can say that, with the support of an invigorated faculty and



Renu Khator is the eighth Chancellor of the UH System and thirteenth President of the University of Houston – the third individual to hold the dual titles. She is also the first Indian immigrant to head a major U.S. higher education system.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.



The University has always benefitted from the wise counsel and guidance of Houston's most prominent civic and business leaders. In 1961, the 57th Texas Legislature voted to transform UH into a state-supported university, effective September 1963, when Governor John Connally appointed a Board of Regents whose members were (from left) Edward D. Manion, James A. Elkins, Jr., Lyndall Wortham, James T. Duke, Col. William B. Bates, Corbin J. Robertson, Sr., Aaron J. Farfel, Jack J. Valenti, and George S. Hawn.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, University Archives, University of Houston Libraries.

hard-working staff members, many of my goals and plans for the University have been realized.

The University of Houston has been elevated to the highest ranking of research universities — the equivalent of Tier One — by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Faculty, in ever-increasing numbers, are receiving national accolades in the form of prestigious grants and awards, and the number of faculty who are members of the various National Academies continues to grow.

Researchers are pooling their resources and skills to apply for multi-PI federal grants in the health sciences and energy — and receiving them.

New degrees, such as a bachelor's in petroleum engineering, a master's in arts administration, and a master's in subsea engineering, have been launched to great success in response to workplace demands.

New construction is changing the face of the campus, from parking garages and student housing facilities — they used to be called “dorms” in my time — to a new stadium and a multi-modal center to take full advantage of the new METRO rail line that will link UH to downtown Houston.

A UH Energy Research Park has been created to serve as the home of energy-related academic programs and industry-university joint ventures that hold great promise for our nation's energy security and independence. An Energy Advisory Board, comprised of the CEOs of top energy companies, has been formed to guide these efforts. Our next goal in this area? To transform the University of Houston into the nation's and the world's “energy university.”

The University of Houston has been accepted as a member institution of the Texas Medical Center, reflecting our growing importance in health-related education and research.

In academics and student life, we are creating the second-largest on-campus resident student population in Texas. These students are attracted here by the opportunity to live and learn alongside students from 136 nations, an opportunity that provides them with inter-personal relationships

and experiences that will prepare them to be leaders in their careers — anywhere in the world!

Our entering Class of 2016 is our strongest class ever, selected from the largest pool of applicants ever. Over 23,000 students applied for 3,300 freshmen slots. Thirty-three percent of the enrolled class ranked in the Top 10% of their high school and scored an average of 1134 on SAT. The class consists of 34 National Merit Scholars and 58 Tier One Scholars who receive full-ride scholarships supported by an anonymous gift of \$7 million!

I mentioned earlier that support from faculty and staff has been key to moving UH forward. I must note as well



Raymund A. Paredes, Texas Commissioner of Higher Education, was guest of honor at a Wortham House dinner in October 2012. He was welcomed by President Khator and Nelda Luce Blair, chairman of the UH System Board of Regents.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

the invaluable support from our donors — to the tune of \$109 million in gifts this past year — and the support of our corporate and business partners in the community. This support, led by the Greater Houston Partnership, brought our case for Tier One-level funding to the Legislature and voters, resulting in the successful passage of a constitutional amendment to create a permanent fund for Tier One research.

Some may think, “Well, UH is now a Tier One university, so what’s left to do?” And I answer, plenty more!

At the University of Houston, we will continue to work very hard to realize our number one priority of student success, while advancing the institution’s four “big rocks” — UH Health, UH Energy, UH Arts, and UH Stars (programs that are on the cusp of national prominence). We measure student success by the number of students who graduate, and all our efforts are being concentrated on bringing those numbers up to national standards.

At the UH System, of which I am Chancellor, we will continue to elevate UH-Clear Lake, UH-Downtown, and UH-Victoria to prominence in their respective categories, while expanding our academic offerings at our off-campus teaching centers in Sugar Land, Katy, Pearland, Northwest Houston, and the Texas Medical Center.



Looking back at what has been accomplished in recent years, I can say with absolute pride that the dreams of those early Houston advocates for higher education have been realized beyond their wildest expectations.

President Khator is fond of repeating the saying “I’m not from Texas, but I got here as fast as I could.” An avid supporter of Go Texan Day and the annual rodeo, she poses by one of the two large cougar sculptures presented to the University by John Moores, alumnus and former member of the UH System Board of Regents.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

Founded in 1927 as Houston Junior College — we are celebrating our 85th anniversary this year! — the University of Houston was blessed from its founding by the “can do” spirit of friends and supporters who believed in their hearts that Houston would one day become a world-class city in need of a world class university.

That legacy of support started with the Taub and Settegast families who gave land for the present campus, and continued with the exceptional generosity of Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen and their descendants in the Cullen and Robertson families. More recently, the Bauer, Moores, Hilton, Melcher, O’Quinn, Farish, Rockwell, Blaffer, Hines, and Cemo names grace our buildings and colleges, testimony to that enduring legacy of support.

I can say without reservations that in 85 short years the University of Houston has come a long way, from 232 students in that first class in the summer of 1927, to a national comprehensive university that is a powerhouse of research and education, and the engine that drives Houston’s economy and civic life, enriching the quality of life of our citizens and ensuring the progress of our city and our state.

Our 40,700-plus students today are the beneficiaries of those visionary Houstonians who created the University of Houston, and I am humbled and honored to be playing a small part in that incredible journey that has brought us so far, and that still holds such promise for the future.

I am reminded of a saying I’ve heard many times — “I’m not from Texas, but I got here as fast as I could.” I will never regret that I did.

