



UH President Renu Khator delivers her eleventh Fall Address in October 2019, highlighting the many achievements of staff, students, and faculty and sharing her excitement about the new College of Medicine.

All photos courtesy of the University of Houston unless otherwise noted.

Not If, but When:

Renu Khator and the Evolution of the University of Houston

By Samantha de León

As the University of Houston (UH) inches closer to its centennial in 2027, the anniversary offers the perfect opportunity to reflect on the school's past and its growth. UH has blossomed from its early days as a junior college to a research institution with record-breaking enrollment, national rankings for multiple academic programs, over a billion dollars donated to its recent fundraising campaign, and admission to the Big 12 Conference. These recent milestones are owed largely to Dr. Renu Khator, who became president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the University of Houston System in 2008, making her the first female chancellor in Texas and the first Indian immigrant to lead a comprehensive U.S. research university. She has elevated UH onto the national stage, making it one of the top schools in Texas and the nation. Her ambitions and vision for the campus remain evident with the creation of the new Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine and impressive improvements to campus infrastructure. Achieving this level of success did not come easy, however, and the journey began on the other side of the world.

Humble Beginnings

As a young girl, Renu was keen on education. Growing up in Uttar Pradesh, India, she had few female role models to follow, however. "I grew up in a family, in a town, where



Renu's mother, Suman Maheshwari, and father, Satish Chandra Maheshwari, greatly influenced Renu's upbringing and education.

I just did not see any woman, after being married, have any kind of career or even going to school,” Khator said candidly. “But one thing for sure ... I had passion for education. ... I wanted to get the highest degree possible.” The government did not guarantee women an education during her youth in the sixties and seventies; by 1991, less than 40 percent of India’s 330 million girls and women aged seven and older were literate.¹



Suresh and Renu Khator shortly after getting married in 1973.

Driven by her passion, Renu earned her bachelor’s degree at Kanpur University and then, in 1973, persuaded her parents to allow her to pursue her master’s in education at Allahabad University, all by the age of eighteen. “I loved being in school ... that was my dream,” she recalled. Renu held on to that dream, even after her father arranged for her to marry Dr. Suresh Khator that same year and ended her master’s degree pursuits at Allahabad University. Suresh was a Purdue University student who lived in the United States at the time. Recalling her wedding day, she said, “I was crying a lot ... [saying] ‘My life is over.’ [Suresh] asked me why, and I said, ‘Because now I cannot study and that was my only dream.’ So, he promised me that he will make sure I do get my dream.”²

True to his word, Suresh secured a meeting with Purdue University’s graduate office. Although initially skeptical, Purdue officials allowed Renu to sit in on two classes as an unenrolled student to prove herself. Not yet fluent in English, she watched eight hours of television a day to solidify her grammar. After Purdue admitted her, Renu received her master’s in political science just a year and a half later, in 1975. By 1985, she had earned her Ph.D. in political science and public administration.³

Renu Khator’s education opened the door to teaching at the University of South Florida (USF), where Suresh also worked. She held a variety of different positions over twenty-two years at USF, where she eventually worked her way up to provost and senior vice president. In 2007, a UH search committee selected her as the sole finalist for the dual position of UH President and University of Houston System Chancellor. Her decision to leave USF was not one she made lightly. “I always believed that great universities are built by great communities. So, I had to make sure that I was going to a place where I would be a good fit,” Khator admitted. “Houston, it was amazing—not just the absolutely fabulous diversity of the city but the can-do attitude where I felt like, ‘Okay, maybe new things are possible.’”⁴

The March to Excellence

Khator arrived at the University of Houston in January 2008, optimistic and excited about the future. She believed the school was ripe for becoming a nationally competitive research university, promising in her job interviews that UH would achieve Tier One status. At the time, it seemed like an overly optimistic, almost impossible promise, given UH’s reputation as a second-choice school. But by 2011, the Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education had recognized UH as a R1 institution, a recognition reserved for universities with high research activity.⁵

For years, locals referred to the university as “Cougar High.” This stemmed from the school’s founding in 1927 as a junior college under the Houston Independent School District. Also, UH initially held classes in a high school building and played football in a former high school stadium. Although UH had become a four-year institution in 1934 and a public institution in 1963, it struggled to shed its image as a substandard college. Despite these derogatory sentiments, Khator saw promise in UH thanks to its location. In considering UH and the city, she thought, “All the industries that are around—energy, arts, and NASA, and Texas Medical Center—and I just could not figure it out. Why is it that the University of Houston, which is ... such a large [public university] is not already a Tier One institution?” She was eager to find out. “A city like Houston needed a top-tier institution. So, this was sort of like a challenge, and I love a good challenge. That’s what brought me here – the hope, the dreams, the possibilities.”⁶

In November 2008, less than a year into her tenure as president, Renu Khator laid out her vision: “We pledge that, as a system of higher education, we will provide access to students from all backgrounds, living in any part of the region and the state, and having any level of educational



Renu Khator, posing in western attire in 2009, celebrated her move to Texas and the ever-popular Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo after joining the University of Houston.



An engaging speaker, President Khator regularly visits classrooms to encourage students to strive for excellence, so they become the leaders and innovators of tomorrow.

aspirations.” She affirmed, “We pledge that their educational experience will be top-tier, and their training will be globally competitive.” She also promised to “raise \$100 million toward the goal of student success.” Khator was hopeful UH would achieve Tier One status within five to seven years, and the rest would follow.⁷

By 2011, in half the predicted time, the University of Houston achieved Tier One status. In 2015, Phi Beta Kappa, the nation’s oldest and most prestigious honor society, initiated a chapter at UH, and in 2020, the UH College of Medicine opened as the city’s first new medical school in nearly half a century. Amid these achievements, in 2013, UH launched its first capital campaign in nearly three decades. The “Here, We Go” campaign saw donors responding in droves, reaching its \$1 billion goal eighteen months ahead of schedule in February 2019.⁸

UH’s successes under President Khator’s leadership go beyond fundraising and prestige to include athletics. Between 2017 and 2023, the UH Men’s Basketball team reached the Final Four, Elite Eight, and Sweet Sixteen in the men’s NCAA tournament, became two-time conference tournament and four-time conference season champs, had six consecutive twenty-win seasons,

and ranked as the second-winningest team in the nation in 2021. The UH’s Men’s Basketball team ranked No. 1 in the nation in the AP Top 25 for two consecutive weeks in November and December 2022, and at the close of the season. Men’s Basketball had not been ranked No. 1 in nearly forty years, since Phi Slamma Jamma in 1983. Coach Kelvin Sampson ranked among the top four coaches all season in the Coaches Poll.⁹

In 2023, the University of Houston will achieve its goal of joining a Power Five Conference when it becomes part of the Big 12. The decision to invest in sports was a no-brainer for Khator. “To me, every element within the university should aspire to be at the national level. ... So for athletics not to be a winning program, [an] irrelevant program, just wasn’t acceptable,” she stated. “Athletics brings alumni together. ... It’s important for our students ... [Athletics] gives everyone a common platform.”¹⁰

Methodology and Beliefs: Pushing UH to the Top

UH’s elevation and transformation into a respected, recognized school has required extensive effort, and Khator’s recipe for success required multiple steps. The first required garnering confidence in UH among community members, students, and faculty on and off-campus. “When I came here, I thought it would take me quite a bit of time to convince [Houstonians]... to believe in what the University of Houston could become,” Khator confessed. “But when I started doing so, I realized that the community was ready. What was lacking was our own self-confidence of the university, our own belief that we could be different.”¹¹

Equally important to Khator’s methodology was her own attitude. Khator owes her strong sense of optimism to her personal life, from her journey to the United States to her family’s support. “Coming here and seeing the fruits of

educational success, what education can make you, what kind of dreams are possible—all of those things have given me this very, very strong sense of optimism, even when things are really adverse. I always try to see opportunities there.”¹²

In addition to confidence and attitude, Khator highlighted the importance of community and community support. “It’s not about a university—it’s about the region, [and] it’s about the community. I believe that if you are true to your core mission in being an important part of



President Khator and UH mascot Sasha enjoy the pregame festivities outside TDECU Stadium. The Cougars’ stadium opened in 2014 and anchors the campus Athletics District.

Photo courtesy of University of Houston Athletics.



Shown left to right, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, who is a UH graduate, President Khator, and Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis break ground on the Cullen Boulevard construction project to improve safety and drainage on campus and in the area.

the future of the city and your region and your state, I think then many opportunities open.” To Khator, the University of Houston is “not just ... an organization. We are part of a community, a neighborhood.”¹³

Above all, Khator’s striking love of learning and education continues to be a fundamental cornerstone in her academic philosophy. “Education is such an important pathway. People sometimes don’t realize the power of it. But I can tell you, from my experience and so many I see, it opens so many doors that we didn’t think possible,” Khator explained. “When your path becomes clear I think people come to help you because you are in sync with your community, with the mission, with the relevance.”¹⁴ With learning, confidence, a positive attitude, and a relationship with the community, goals become achievable.

No Perfect Journeys

Khator’s impact on the university is undeniable, and recognized by faculty, board members, and beyond. Former chairwoman and Board of Regents member Nelda Blair called Khator “a rock star,” adding, “I don’t say that lightly – because people are just amazed at what she’s been able to accomplish in such a short period of time.” Doug Horn, former managing director of Houstonian Estates and a UH graduate, commends Khator on her tenure: “[She] has done an outstanding job for a university that was listless before she got there,” he said. “[UH] was looking for greatness and she made it great.”¹⁵

As with any successful leader, their policies are rarely immune to criticism. For example, in 2014, UH came under fire when construction of its football stadium exceeded its budget by \$23 million. Students and UH’s student senate called for the removal of the vice president of administration and finance, Dr. Carl Carlucci, following multiple audits investigating stadium funding and hiring of unqualified

individuals. Carlucci stepped down in April 2014 and returned to teaching. In an email announcing his resignation, Khator noted that, “Under his leadership, the physical landscape of the University of Houston has been completely transformed,” referring to the eighteen buildings (including the stadium) constructed during his tenure.¹⁶

Just three months later, Khator announced a ten-year, \$15 million naming rights deal with TDECU, the Houston area’s biggest credit union. At the time this represented the “largest ever naming rights deal for a college football stadium.” In September 2022, the agreement was extended through 2034, and includes an additional \$20 million investment to be used for football operation as the university moves to the Big 12.¹⁷

Khator also received criticism for waiting too long after her arrival to connect in earnest with the predominantly Black Third Ward community that surrounds the campus, even though UH departments had worked in the community for decades. Khator countered the naysayers, explaining, “You have to be internally strong in order to stand up and say, ‘What do I do next?’” Her administration had to first focus on meeting the university benchmarks that would enable it to engage effectively in community outreach. In 2016, the University of Houston started the Third Ward Initiative, a partnership dedicated to giving back to the neighborhood by focusing on four pillars: health, arts, economic empowerment, and education. The program has already proven to be successful. For example, five out of the six neighborhood schools that UH partnered with at the program’s inception showed considerable improvements in the Texas Education Agency ratings, growing from failing ratings to a passing C rating or higher.¹⁸



President Khator reacts to being inducted into the UH Athletics Hall of Honor in 2018. Leading up to this recognition, UH had reached the American Athletic Conference Championships in football and basketball, the Elite Eight and Final Four in the NCAA men’s basketball tournament, and consistently ranked in Top-25 polls in both sports.



President Khator addresses graduates at a 2009 commencement ceremony. Today, with 47,000 students enrolled, UH is the state's third largest university and has dramatically improved in numerous metrics from student retention and graduation rates to research expenditures, awards and recognitions, and student satisfaction. As a result, the university received 38,000 freshman applications in 2022 – double the number it received in 2010.

Looking Towards the Future

When considering the past century of UH accomplishments, Khator shies away from taking sole credit, indicating, "I don't know if I have made any contributions because I really do believe it takes a village, and I am one piece in that village effort. Everybody – the city, the donors, the students, the faculty, staff, alumni – we all have pulled together behind the vision," she said. As UH inches closer to its centennial,

the campus radiates an optimistic aura for the next hundred years in the wake of Khator's unwavering positivity. Her next goal is to have UH listed among the nation's top fifty public universities. She explained, "The way I look at it is people need a destination because that keeps everybody focused, and that destination has to be completely meaningful."¹⁹ Top fifty meets that goal.

Even after fifteen years at UH's helm, Khator is still excited to be at the University of Houston, if not more excited than she was upon arrival. Her enthusiasm, as well as her time at UH, have demonstrated the power of belief from the top down. From the Tier One recognition to financial promise and athletic prominence, UH has transformed from a second-choice destination to a powerhouse, continuously growing and elevating itself. "I believe Houston, University of Houston is a prototype of what others are going to be in twenty or twenty-five years. We have an opportunity to be successful, to show the model, the winning model. To me that's exciting."²⁰ If Khator's track record and testament are any indication, it's not if that will happen, it's when. **HH**



President Renu Khator helps students move in on Friday, August 22, 2014.

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