

UH Has Problems, But it Excels, Too

By Bill Hobby

Recently I was asked to become interim chancellor of the University of Houston System, and I shall do so on September 1.

Why did I take the job? The University of Houston has had its share of problems in the past few years. Turnover among administrators has been unusual. Chancellors, presidents of the campuses, provosts, deans, vice-presidents have come and gone at a great rate. The old joke about "When the boss calls, find out who he is," could have been written about the University of Houston.

The dust kicked up by the comings and goings obscures the greatness and vitality of the institution. Its greatest asset and virtue is that it is in Houston, a dynamic, growing city that I have called home for 63 years. Houston is the world center of the energy industry, and a great international port with a powerful sense of entrepreneurship. Its economy is as diverse as its citizenry. It is blessed with extraordinary political leadership in Mayor Bob Lanier, whose wife Elyse is a UH regent.

Few institutions of higher education boast the community support UH has. Houstonians may not want to see the Cougars play football but they are willing to speak with their pocketbooks. Last year UH ranked second in the nation, behind Harvard University, in private foundation support. This year it is 31st in the nation, outranking all Texas institutions except the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

The main campus is a nationally recognized research institution with world class programs in creative writing, drama, law, physical sciences and hotel management. The main campus is the home of the superconductivity lab run by Dr. Paul Chu, who has discovered techniques of moving electricity through ceramics at temperatures far above those ever thought possible a decade ago. It has a renowned Creative Writing Program where students, many of whom go on to win national prizes, sit at the feet of the masters. Its School of Theatre, where Dennis and Randy Quaid learned their trade, now has Pulitzer prize-winner Edward Albee and Tony award winner Stuart Ostrow both in residence.

UH has an Honors College of 1,200 selected students who explore western civilization and a Scholars' Community which deepens the university experience for commuting students.

UH Downtown (UHD) is an open-admission university. It offers classes at night and on weekends and electronically. UHD is entirely an undergraduate institution. But next semester professors from another UH campus - Clear Lake - will begin offering a Master's Degree in Finance. UH Downtown takes students where they are, whether they are high school students with little hope of attending college or young urban professionals looking for another degree, and moves them where they want to go.

UH Clear Lake (UHCL) is a model for upper-level institutions, catering to adult professional students who want education in business, science, education or the humanities. UHCL will soon begin offering a Master's in Business Administration for doctors at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. Unlike upper-level institutions elsewhere in Texas, it has stayed true to its role as a senior institution and never sought to become a four-year university. It seems to thrive, even without a football team.

UH Victoria (UHV) expands the system's reach to serve South Central Texas. UHV has pioneered a program called Move It Math. Move It Math teaches elementary and junior high school teachers how to teach math. UHV not only teaches this skill in South Texas, but in Dallas, where they really need it.

The UH institutions believe in going to the customer. UH faculty members teach all over the greater Houston area: in the Texas Medical Center, the Woodlands, West Houston, at Compaq Computer. All

four of the UH institutions are working together to teach courses in Fort Bend County, holding classes in a Wharton County Junior College building and in Clements High School.

Higher education is responsible for Texas' economic shift from a Third World state - dependent on minerals and vegetables that come out of the ground - to a technological power - dependent on things that come out of people's heads.

The world has changed. No longer do we go to school, train for a career, find a job and work until we retire. Not many of our children will follow that traditional pattern.

The opportunity in the new economy is for the knowledge worker - the person who can acquire complex new skills quickly as the needs of the economy shift. The knowledge worker may have three or more careers. The knowledge worker goes to school all his life and rarely has the luxury of taking several years off from earning a living.

That is why I thought it was so insightful that UH student Dominic Corva described UH as "exactly what this city needs: a continuing opportunity rather than a one-time shot."

UH is adapting to the needs of our customers who need to be able to acquire education at times and places convenient to them. A new weekend college will be started at the UH main campus. Downtown already offers many courses on Friday nights and Saturdays, and response has been excellent.

New telecommunications technology holds great promise. The UH system is moving quickly down that path. We are breaking down the barriers that make it annoyingly inconvenient for students to take courses from more than one of the UH components.

What is emerging, as our perceptive student pointed out in *The Daily Cougar*, is not a UCLA or a University of Chicago but an education system matched to Houston's needs. It will specialize in part-time students. It specializes in diversity. It combines excellence with access.

More than any other university I know about, the University of Houston institutions are prepared for the task of educating people for the future. Since its beginning 58 years ago, the University of Houston has helped shape Houston and has itself been shaped by the city I call home.

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