

Longtime USF administrator is leaving

Provost Renu Khator says she has agreed to become president at the University of Houston.

By SHANNON COLAVECCHIO-VAN SICKLER, Times Staff Writer

Published October 16, 2007

TAMPA - After years of being courted by colleges across the nation, the University of South Florida's No. 2 administrator finally said yes.

Renu Khator is poised to leave the institution where she began her career 22 years ago to lead the University of Houston and its five affiliated institutions.

Khator is the sole finalist for the dual title of president and system chancellor, UH spokesman Eric Gerber announced Monday. The UH system board of regents is expected to confirm her appointment after the 21-day public comment period required by Texas law.

Khator told her staff and college deans about the new job Monday morning, then sent an e-mail to the university community.

Chosen from a field of roughly 200 candidates, she'll go from leading day-to-day operations for Florida's third-largest university of 45,000 students to overseeing four campuses and two college teaching centers that enroll a total of 56,000.

"Dr. Khator is an educational superstar," said UH System regents chairman Welcome Wilson. "She brings a wealth of experience in moving a great university onto the national stage."

Headhunters for institutions including the University of Mississippi, Temple University and the University of Nevada tried in recent years to lure Khator to those presidencies, but she always declined. When Houston came calling this year, Khator decided it was time to answer.

"It's going to be a very emotional departure, because this place seems like home," said Khator, 52, who started at USF in 1985 as a visiting assistant professor. "But you know, the University of Houston is just so much like USF - a metropolitan university, very committed to student success, very internationally oriented, and very committed to rising in the national ranks. It just seemed like the right time."

Khator's husband is an engineering professor at USF, and she said he might stay at USF for a short time after she leaves.

USF spokesman Ken Gullette said the university won't decide on an interim replacement or the search process for a new provost until Khator's appointment is confirmed next month. Khator is expected to assume her new post by January.

UH officials did not release information about Khator's salary, saying it will be part of contract negotiations after she is confirmed. At USF, she makes \$298,698 a year.

Mixed emotions

"We greet the announcement from the University of Houston with very mixed emotions," USF president Judy Genshaft said in a prepared release, "Thrilled at this exciting opportunity for such a gifted educator, but with full realization of the loss we will experience."

Students echoed that sentiment. "She's fun to be around, she has a great sense of humor, and she's such an intelligent woman," said student body president Garrin Flowers.

Khator's rise in academia almost didn't happen.

She says she was 18 and living in her native India when her parents ordered her to marry a stranger. His name was Suresh Khator. She cried and refused to eat, certain the arranged marriage would ruin her college plans.

She married him anyway 10 days later, and in 1974 they moved to the United States, where Suresh encouraged her to pursue a higher education.

While he earned his doctorate in engineering at Purdue, she got her master's in political science. They returned briefly to India, but returned to Purdue in 1979 while Khator earned her doctorate.

The couple and their two young daughters, Pooja and Parul, moved to Tampa when Suresh Khator got a job at USF, and by 1985 she was an assistant visiting professor in USF's political science department. From then on, her rise was strong and steady.

Khator was director of the environmental science and policy program, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, faculty senate president and faculty assistant to then-USF president Betty Castor. She became interim provost in 2003 and got the permanent job in 2004.

More recently, state budget shortfalls dealt Khator some of her greatest administrative challenges. The nearly 4 percent reduction in USF's budget for this year prompted Khator to freeze hiring, halt much travel, and re-evaluate programs and course offerings.

Khator told administrators to head back to the classroom, and she led by example, teaching USF's first-ever Hindi class.

The USF administration and faculty union are currently at odds over Khator's decision to increase the maximum enrollment of classes to match the capacity of the room in which they are taught.

Some business classes have doubled from about 200 students to 400, said USF faculty union president Sherman Dorn.

He does credit Khator with helping the USF faculty negotiate annual raises of between 4 percent and 5 percent.

'Student at the center'

Khator said she hopes she is remembered for improving the academic experience for students.

"My philosophy has been to put the student at the center of every decision we make," Khator said.

USF's six-year graduation rate is 47 percent, up from 46 percent when Khator became provost.

The average SAT for freshmen was 1108 in 2004; this fall it's 1148. In fall 2004, USF had three National Merit Scholars; this year there are 12.

Khator, always eager to talk about her native culture, also emphasized USF's role in international research. She helped secure a \$34-million donation from Tampa philanthropists Kiran and Pallavi Patel to build the Patel Center, a research center that aims to improve living conditions in poor countries such as Kenya and Honduras.

USF's research dollars went from \$213-million in 2003 to \$286-million in 2006.

USF Health is doing AIDS education outreach, and nursing and public health students and researchers have helped officials in India establish a public health school, said Michael Hoad, associate vice president for communications for USF Health.

"I suspect that what people will remember years from now is, she opened the door to USF being a global university," Hoad said. "She has genuine credibility around the world."

Fast facts**University of Houston**

Founded: 1927.

Campus: 560 acres.

Enrollment: 35,000, including nearly 20 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, over 19 percent Hispanic, and 13 percent African-American.

Annual research: \$77-million.

Student-faculty ratio: 27:1.

Degrees offered: 109 bachelor's, 131 master's, 51 doctoral, and three special professional degree programs. UH awards more than 6,600 degrees annually.

UH system

Enrollment: 56,000 students.

Employees: More than 10,000 faculty and staff members.

Annual budget: Close to \$1-billion.

Serves: Greater Houston metropolitan area and upper Gulf Coast region.

Institution members: University of Houston; the University of Houston-Downtown; the University of Houston-Clear Lake and the University of Houston-Victoria, both upper-division and master's-level institutions. The teaching centers include the UH System at Sugar Land in Fort Bend and the UH System at Cinco Ranch.

Source: UH System

© 2007 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[Contact the Times](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)