



UH goes deep for Tier One goal

Wilson leads push in university's bid for top status

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Dave Rossman Chronicle

Welcome Wilson Sr. says reaching Tier One status would help create jobs in the Houston area.

Welcome Wilson Sr. enrolled at the University of Houston 64 years ago and, in some ways, he's never left. A real estate developer whose projects include Jamaica Beach and Tiki Island, Wilson has been a member of the board of regents since 2006. In September, he was named chairman of the Tier One Public Campaign, charged with pushing the university along a path approved by voters last November, when they agreed to allow UH and six other public universities in Texas to tap the newly created National Research University Fund as they met certain benchmarks. He sat down recently with Chronicle reporter Jeannie Kever to talk about his latest role and the university's efforts to become a nationally recognized research university.

Q: Tell me about this Tier One Public Campaign. What will you be doing?

A: We've raised our sights. We've raised our admission standards. My job is to get the metropolitan Houston area and the Legislature excited. I'm speaking to groups several times a week, reaching out to every civic organization, to the business community, and making them understand what a Tier One university is and what it would do for Houston. I hope I'm able to make the public understand why it's important. I hope to get the level of support, financial support and other things, from the community to a higher level.

Q: What's so important about the Tier One status?

A: In Boston, 4,000 companies have been formed based on research from (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) alone. They employ 1.1 million people. Imagine that in Houston. It's important for Houston to have that generation of jobs and income. It's an opportunity for the citizens of Houston to attend a Tier One university.

Q: Some people argue that universities should focus on teaching, not research.

A: We have other universities, including the University of Houston-Downtown and the University of Houston-Clear Lake, to carry out the mission of education for everyone. We (at UH) are 13 percent African-American, 20 percent Hispanic, 7 percent international and 60 percent Anglo and Asian. We're going to maintain our diversity.

Q: How soon could UH begin to get money from the National Research University Fund approved by voters last year?

A: As early as next year, or within two years. The fund set seven criteria, and you have to qualify on five.

Q: It's no secret that the state is facing a huge budget deficit and higher education is likely to be cut. Will that slow the effort?

A: We are preparing to cut, and we have made cuts. We've let a lot of people go at all of the (UH system) universities. We've cut a number of programs. We're going to lobby for our fair share, but we're willing to make the cuts that are needed. We hope it will not affect it too much. The money for Tier One (from the National Research University Fund) was already there. That doesn't have to be appropriated. The other thing is the Texas Research Incentive Program funds, which match private donations. That is only \$25 million. I have urged (House speaker) Joe Straus and (Lt. Gov.) David Dewhurst to maintain that money. It's seed money.

Q: Can tuition keep going up?

A: That's kind of subjective. We are going to do everything possible to keep tuition as affordable as we can. I feel the future of education in Texas needs to be a two-plus-two program, where a greater percentage of our students get their start at a (far cheaper) community college. We think that's an efficient way to educate Texans.

Q: The governor has pushed for more separation between teaching and research, to ensure that faculty paid with public money are teaching instead of working in their labs. How can we be sure university research is a good deal for taxpayers?

A: The seven breakthrough solutions (proposed by Gov. Rick Perry in 2008), we took that to heart. We now post online student evaluations of teachers, because one thing he wanted was more transparency. They felt that too many professors were spending time on research and not teaching, when student success is our No. 1 mission. Frankly, I don't think the University of Houston has that problem, while other

schools might. We're too new. And in these budget-cutting times, if anybody is goofing off, they've already been found out.

Q: What role does money play in building a better university?

A: First of all, scholarship money. We need to get the top graduates of high schools in Houston to want to go to the University of Houston. We need to make the parents of bright students want their students to go to the University of Houston. My plan is to reach out to every organization in metropolitan Houston, to reach out to the business community and get them enmeshed in the University of Houston. Most of all, I'm going to reach out to the Legislature.

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