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March 31, 2008, 11:50PM

UH survey elicits plenty of answers

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Shake the money trees in Austin.

Eradicate the "Cougar High" mentality.

Sports ... football ... football.

Stop playing the role of victim and do things that inspire pride and attract talent.

Start a pipe band!

Carve a niche in the academic space.

Serve more Indian vegetarian food on campus.

Renu Khator asked for it and she got it.

After promoting it at luncheons and on freeway billboards, the new chancellor of the University of Houston has gotten 5,000 responses (and counting) to her "100 Days" online survey, which seeks community input throughout her first several months on the job.

From constructive to lofty to whiny, UH students, staff, faculty, alumni, parents and Houstonians with no ties to the school provided hundreds of pages of advice on how to build UH's future.

There were several common refrains in the responses: The university should become more involved with the community, recruit prestigious faculty, conduct cutting-edge research, raise admission standards, replace commuter culture with a college community, build pride and generate publicity.

But a glimpse at the responses illustrates the Herculean task Khator faces in trying to address current challenges while working to turn UH into what she calls a flagship, or nationally recognized top-tier research university on par with the University of Texas and that other school in College Station.

I don't envy Khator's position. I got overwhelmed just sifting through the responses.

Live cougar needed?

Students' comments ran the gamut.

"What we really need is investment in the surrounding area to change the dynamic from what it is. Seriously I think the school should start buying houses etc. from the surrounding area and try to revitalize the area. No one wants to go to a school and live on campus in the Ghetto."

"Not to make comparisons but if we're trying to be Texas' next flagship university, I would look at University of Texas at Austin's community. There are coffee shops, clothing stores, book stores etc etc, all over the place outside of campus — in other words, the area is very 'student friendly.'"

"Old people need to donate money and put us in the will when they die."

"One important thing that is a must, I think, is having a LIVE COUGAR." (UH's mascot, Shasta, hasn't been a living animal for 20 years.)

There were a few naysayers: "Stop this crap. The main problem is that leaders at UH don't stick around for very long. The new chancellor, how long do you plan on staying ... until you find a better job."

And sensitive souls: "On a gut level," one student wrote, "when you go to a grocery store in Houston, and you see memorabilia for UT and A&M and maybe even Texas Tech, and not UH, you think UH isn't good enough to be in its own city's grocery stores. I'm a psych major, so these are things I think about."

There were lots of dreamers, especially the student whose idea of a premier research institution is "enough parking for everyone." (Having graduated from one of the state's flagships, I can tell you now, it won't happen. Parking only shrinks with progress.)

Faculty and staff had their own ideas about what a top-tier university is: "An agency that embraces diversity, is comfortable with the 100 failures that may come before 1 brilliant success and a place that invites the community and media to get involved with their discoveries and passions."

And what a top-tier university is not: "a University desperately striving to achieve such status."

Advised others: "Be very aggressive, be as competitive as our counterparts."

"UH's greatest strength and most unique quality is its diversity. Unfortunately, we only pay lip service to its importance. It needs to be incorporated into the curriculum."

Support to improve UH seemed universal among respondents, but views varied on Khator's "research university" goal.

"Research has to be cultivated in every department," said one alum.

"I don't know why UH should even be focused on research," said another.

Big rock, little rock

Khator's staff is reviewing the thousands of responses and will divide them, as Khator puts it, into "big rock" and "little rock" ideas.

Little rock ideas, which deal with day-to-day operations, will go to her vice presidents and big rock ideas, those that deal with vision and the direction of the university, will be examined by its new leader.

The survey will be available roughly until the end of the month at www.uh.edu.

If you haven't yet, drop a few lines.

As Khator says, "It takes an entire community to build a great university."

Or, in the words of a community member: "We all have to become believers. Exactly how this is accomplished I am not sure, but it sure would be fun trying!!!!"

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