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U.S. approach to education worrisome

Univ. of Houston head relays strong message at chamber event

BY CHRIS NELSON

HOUSTON – In the 1980s, American colleges and universities graduated about the same number of science and engineering students per year as those in China and Japan, while South Korean institutions were good for half that amount. A generation later, the United States has fallen behind the three Asian nations in the number of scientists and engineers that it produces. According to Renu Khator, the newly appointed president and chancellor of the University of Houston, this problem is indicative of how Americans approach education, from elementary schools to the university level.



Renu Khator

"American students are simply not prepared to compete in the global economy ... 70 percent of high school students are taught by teachers who did not study math in college or do not have certification in math," Khator said. "Meanwhile, universities are spending \$1 billion annually on remedial courses that are taken by 40 percent of our freshman students."

The Indian-born Khator discussed the state of the American education system at the recent Indo-American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Houston-Shell Oil Co. Distinguished Lecture Series, where she was a featured speaker. In her remarks, she cited the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress, a Congressionally-authorized study that is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics within the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education.

It found that just 17 percent of high school seniors are proficient in mathematics, 36 percent are proficient in English and only 13 percent can speak a foreign language. Perhaps even more disturbing, the study concluded that just 10 percent of American college students are prepared to compete in the global economy.

"This is not a statement about our teachers," Khator said. "They do very hard jobs, they do very good jobs. I have full respect for them. This is a statement about the way that we approach our elementary, middle and high school education. And universities are responsible for that because they train our teachers."

She said that the United States must adopt a new approach to education if it hopes to reverse the aforementioned trends and compete in the global economy. "We do have a problem, and we need to think about it," Khator said. "What will it take and what is being done about it? What it will take is we need a new model, a new approach and most definitely, a new set of expectations that we as a society need to establish."

The American university system, like the primary and secondary education system, is largely decentralized, in large part because the 10th Amendment to the United States Constitution reserves all powers not granted to the federal government or explicitly denied to the U.S. states "for the States respectively, or to the people."

The first institution of higher learning in the United States, Harvard College, was established in 1636 by an act of the Massachusetts Legislature; it awarded its first degrees seven years later.

The school, which is now the undergraduate section of Cambridge, Mass.-based Harvard University, served as a model for other colleges that developed in later years.

Khator criticized this approach to higher learning as too exclusive and urged the nation's 4,292 public colleges and universities to make themselves available to more Americans.

"That model was very much an ivory tower model, one that said, 'We sit here, we have something to offer you and if you can prove that you are good enough to attend school here, then you will be admitted and educated here,'" Khator said. "Then, [the U.S. Congress] passed the G.I. Bill to crack the walls of that ivory tower and make public education available to the masses, but those fences are still around. The universities of today must adopt a different model – they must reach out to the communities, they must go to the people. Those are the universities of tomorrow."

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Historically, Americans viewed higher education a common good, one that benefits society as a whole. But in recent years, national perception about who really benefits from a college degree has shifted toward the individual. The net result is a decline in societal investment in education, forcing students to bear a larger share of the cost of their education. Khator said this cannot continue, or else the United States will not be able to compete with emerging powers like India and China.

"In these times of global competitiveness, I urge you not to think about how cheap we can graduate a student; the goal should be, what kind of graduate do we need at the end of the day, and then make that goal nonnegotiable," she said. "Because I do not want to see our graduates, who will compete with graduates from India, China, Brazil and other countries, not have the skills they need to try and be successful and be leaders in the global economy."

But Khator warned that nothing will change if the United States does not demand more of its elected officials, teachers and students. She said the country must set higher goals for its education system, colleges and universities must expand access to higher learning to people who cannot afford it and that "strong leaders who understand America's role in the global economy" must be willing to make critical decisions that others haven't.

"It is not acceptable to have less competitiveness, it is not acceptable to have a lack of parental involvement in education and it is not acceptable to waste our own potential," Khator said. "We have to set higher goals about our place in higher education in the global setting, and that will take leadership that is willing to learn from the successes and failures of others. It will depend on me, on you and how these plans get executed. Because let's face it – it is not possible to teach today's students with yesterday's tools and hope to be in business tomorrow."

Khator, 52, was picked to head the University of Houston system and oversee its flagship institution last October; she took office in early January. Prior to that, she served for four years as provost at the University of South Florida in Tampa. While there, Khator expanded the school's funded research, as research-grant dollars increased by 22 percent to \$310 million.

She hopes to increase Houston's sponsored research using some of the same techniques that she employed at South Florida, including providing administrative support for grant proposals.

A native of Uttar Pradesh, Khator immigrated to the United States in 1974 after her marriage to Suresh Khator. She holds doctorate and master's degrees in political science from Purdue University and earned a bachelor's degree from Kanpur University in India.

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