A COUGAR WITH TEETH

MH, Houston: Tier One track

Community supports the university's goal because it will be good for the city as well

By HERIKA KHATOK

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n my first two years as president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the UH System, I've learned many things about the city whose well-known name we share. Why the freeways get crowded, where to buy good barbecue and, yes, "San Felipe," which has the best barbecue and why it's not the heat, it's the humidity. I've also learned that the city of Houston truly appreciates the importance of higher education.

Despite the economically challenging times we all face, Houstonians have demonstrated a generous and, I believe, enlightened support of their premier public university. While many institutions across the country and in our state have struggled with notable declines in the charitable donations flowing to them, as president of the University of Houston, I've noticed an interesting counter tendency.

Notably so, Annual giving at UH increased 8 percent in 2008 and 19 percent in 2009, rising from $88 million to $115 million during that period. In fact, UH had both the greatest total dollar increase and largest percentage increase in private support during the past three years among all major public universities in Texas. In other words, while other Texas institutions were remaining flat or declining in their recent fundraising, UH was experiencing significant increases.

This unprecedented level of support is not a bad thing. It is enlightened self-interest. We mustn't forget the impact of a strong, ambitious plan — and considerable progress — to transform UH into a Tier One university. And Houston gets it, genuinely understanding that this crucial transformation simply won't happen without the community's support.

New economic realities have directed us to look to private support to help us take the university to the next level. This is not a new concept; it is simply a new way to Tier One. Fortunately, our community expectations are being realized. The voters of Texas recently approved a constitutional amendment (Proposition 4) that establishes potential funding for UH and six other "emerging research universities" as we meet certain criteria in our respective pursuit of Tier One status. However, this funding remains a few years away from the mountaintop, we must continue to ascend.

TIER ONE

The path to Tier One Scholarships and success has been a significant factor in that success. Essentially, we have told Houstonians that these are the things that are important to us. We believe that Houstonians have taken on our challenge.

But this is also an ROI, if you will, a preliminary note that acknowledges our obligation to pay it back as UH becomes an even more powerful engine of economic development for the region where we are providing more students with critical career opportunities to pursue their dreams.