

UH Today Column for Francine Parker
by
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This starts a new year for the Faculty Senate, and we believe it will be one where UH will continue to move forward as it builds toward being a major research university. It is wise, I believe, that the Senate start its year on a different schedule than much of the rest of the University, as this allows the Senate officers and structure to be continuing when other elements change, thus ensuring there are no complete gaps in people paying attention to University policy.

My overall perspective is that the Senate is, or certainly should be, the major faculty voice for setting general policy in the University. As a Senate, I believe we have sometimes lost sight of the importance for an overall perspective, and have sometimes become overly involved in solving a specific problem. On average, however, there is a lot of specific faculty and administrative expertise being used to solve specific problems, such as through the extensive committee structure. What the Senate needs to bring to bear is a sense of seeing the forest, rather than the individual trees. Thus my objective this year is to help the Senate develop an overall policy perspective, and to use this perspective to tackle some of the larger policy problems that have yet to be widely addressed within the University.

The institutional environment for positive change has never been better. The single most important reason for optimism is the deregulation of tuition by the state government. Until two years ago, all state and local funding for UH was based on the quantity of students (actually, student credit hours). Because we now have the ability to set our own tuition, however, we can now “sell” quality as well as quantity. If our programs are a superior alternative to others in the state, nation, and world, students will be willing to pay for them.

In addition to now having the ability to charge differentially based on our ability to deliver a product of value to students, there is also the important overriding goal of providing education within Texas. And, the problem within Texas is not that there are not enough educational institutions. The problem is instead that there are not enough *good* educational institutions. The queue is at UT and A&M, not at the community colleges. Thus I believe our role in the state is to provide an education comparable to that at those flagship institutions. Thus, it is incumbent upon us develop UH into a premier source of college education at both the undergraduate level, and at the graduate level.

The Senate’s agenda for the coming year is designed to help UH progress to achieving these objectives. Specifically, the Senate conducts the bulk of its business through four standing committees. Each committee needs to develop ongoing expertise at providing policy oversight in areas crucial to the operation of UH, and crucial to improving the perceived and actual quality of the University. There are several areas that deserve attention, including the information used to make administrative allocation decisions, the overall size and quality of the student body, the overall size and quality of the faculty, and the major financing decisions regarding tuition and fundraising.

The Senate will be far from unique at being concerned about these issues within the University. But I believe we can provide an excellent forum for having the policy discussions that are needed to focus UH at achieving its objective of being a University of choice for students in Texas, and for research sponsors worldwide.