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UH narrows its focus to the future

Survey says day-to-day items need attention, but president is thinking bigger

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Parking matters. So does the cafeteria food. But University of Houston President Renu Khator focused on bigger themes as she met with students Friday to talk about transforming the school into a top-ranked research university.

(Hint: Alumni need to open their wallets and also start attending Cougar football games.)

Khator said a blueprint for the future of the 30,000-student campus will be ready in September.

Friday, students heard the results of the First 100 Days survey, in which students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members offered ideas to improve UH. Khator meets with regents about the survey next month.

It was, Khator noted, her 102nd day in office.

"She's just been listening, which I think is good," said Blake Hoopingarner, 23. "Listen before you talk."

Khator began by explaining why the campus should become a nationally recognized research university.

It's not about bragging rights, she said. It's about giving students the knowledge and confidence conferred by a degree from a top-tier school.

The survey yielded several themes: Recruit top students and faculty, improve facilities, increase the focus on athletics and strengthen campus life.

Students also asked for more financial aid, more parking and better customer service.

"There are lots of things that need attention, no doubt about it," Khator said.

Friday, some students focused on specific issues — asking the university to stop investing in China, or that it not contract with companies that don't pay a living wage.

Khator didn't address the former and spoke only briefly on the latter before deferring to Elwyn C. Lee, vice chancellor for student affairs, who said the school tries to contract with women- and minority-owned businesses when it can.

One student noted that he loves UH's diversity and recreation center, but the cafeteria food, not so much. "You've got to take care of that," Khator told Lee. "It's really important."

But she was there to talk about changing the culture of UH. In part, it will take money.

Five percent of UH alumni donate money to the school; at Tier 1 schools, she said, the figure is 15 percent.

UH will raise about \$60 million this year, more than double the amount raised three years ago. Still, she said, Tier 1 institutions raise at least \$100 million a year.

Support for Cougar athletic teams is important, too.

"I'm not happy to see the attendance at football games, basketball games," she said, adding that she will attend every game unless she's out of town. "No (athletic) conference would want us if attendance at our games is 3,000."

But school spirit is about more than sports.

Michele Gaddis, 44, worried that university tutors are overworked, leaving too little time for struggling students.

"I'm not being successful the way I want to be," said Gaddis, who said she has learning disabilities, epilepsy and depression. "My tutor is swamped. I would love to graduate cum laude, but I'll be lucky if I get a 2.0 this semester."

Lee promised to check it out.

Khator, meanwhile, applauded Gaddis' efforts.

"That's the Cougar spirit," she said. "To want to do the best."

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