

Chancellor & President
discusses UH's ambition of
being Tier One university
by Beverly Denver

Renu Khator holds the dual titles of chancellor of the University of Houston System and president of the University of Houston. She is the UH System's first woman chancellor and the first Indian immigrant to head a comprehensive research university in the U.S. She assumed her post in January 2008.

As chancellor of the UH System, Khator oversees an organization that serves more than 61,000 students, has a budget that exceeds \$1.2 billion, and has a \$3 billion economic impact on the Greater Houston area each year. The UH System includes the University of Houston, UH-Downtown, UH-Clear Lake and UH-Victoria, teaching centers in Sugar Land, Cinco Ranch and Pearland, KUHT, the nation's first educational television station, and KUHF, Houston's National Public Radio station.

As president of the University of Houston, she is the CEO of the largest and oldest of the four UH System universities.

She received her master's degree and her Ph.D. in political science from Purdue University. Prior to her appointment at UH, she was provost and senior vice president at the University of South Florida, capping a 22-year career at that institution.

Today, Khator finds herself at a new pinnacle in her career — at the helm of a university that she believes is poised for greatness.

Welcome W. Wilson Sr., chairman of the UH System Board of Regents, is effusive in his praise of Khator, saying recently she has "set this community on fire."

Houston Woman Magazine was granted this interview with Dr. Renu Khator recently. We asked about her goals for UH and, specifically, about her ambition of moving UH to Tier One status.

Houston Woman Magazine: Would you tell our readers about your hometown and your family of origin?

Renu Khator: I was born and raised in Farrukhabad, a small town in northern India, about 200 miles from New Delhi.

My father, Satish C. Maheshwari, passed away three years before I came to the University of Houston. He was an attorney. My mother, Suman Maheshwari, lives in India and is the person most responsible for instilling in me a passion for learning. She never joined the workforce, but she worked hard as a homemaker her entire life. Recently, I wrote a tribute to her that was published in a Hindi magazine. It is now being translated into English to be published in the United States.

HWM: As a woman, what has been the biggest challenge you've had to face?

Khator: Growing up in a small town in India, I really didn't have any role models in terms of seeing any women in my family or my town – or even in my extended family – who had gone to school after marriage. So, persuading my father to allow me to pursue my dream of an education was certainly a challenge. Then, after I married, we came to America, where I had to prove that I could handle graduate courses, even though I did not speak any English. I knew that as a woman and an immigrant, I would have to work harder to accomplish my goals. But I never allowed those circumstances to minimize me or diminish my dreams.

HWM: What are your goals as president and chancellor?

Khator: The community, Houston, has defined my goal! When I came to Houston as president, I started with a 100-day plan and asked the community to give me my charge and tell me what I should do. I received 12,000 suggestions and the most often mentioned was to make the University of Houston a Tier One university. While many did not use the word, "Tier One," that is what they were craving for. After a full strategic planning process that lasted several months, the goal of becoming Tier One stood firm. Our goal is to be a nationally competitive university in research and student learning.

HWM: Why is it important for UH to gain Tier One status?

Khator: The University of Houston has an obligation to the city of Houston, which truly appreciates the importance of higher education. As its largest public university, graduating more than 7,300 students each year, the University of

Houston must meet the dual demands in education. It must provide access but it must also ensure global competitiveness through research. All great cities house multiple universities that are nationally competitive. Look at the three largest cities in America (New York, Los Angeles and Chicago), and you will find that all of them are served by Tier One universities that together train 60,000 students and bring \$1 billion dollars in federal research. It is clear that as the fourth-largest city in America, Houston is under-served. Today, we live in a knowledge economy. The competitive edge comes from your ability to innovate and compete. It will be difficult for Houston to remain nationally and globally competitive for too long without a Tier One public university.

University of Houston's goal of becoming a Tier One university is equally important for the state of Texas. In comparison to New York and California, Texas also is under-served by not having enough Tier One universities in the state.

HWM: What are the steps to becoming a Tier One university?

Khator: A Tier One university is a nationally competitive university. That means a university must demonstrate its national excellence in four areas: (1) research and scholarship, (2) faculty quality, (3) student learning and (4) community support. The University Houston excels in most of these areas, but we need to fill the gaps in others. To become Tier One, we have to synergize our strengths with the strengths of Houston.

Therefore, our objective is to strengthen old, and create new, partnerships in energy, health and the arts. A cornerstone of our strategy is the Energy Research Park, which is evolving on the 75-acre property we recently purchased near the campus. The Park will house our research and training programs, but will also become the hub of innovation and creative discovery in energy. Our efforts are guided by the UH Energy Advisory Board, whose membership consists of world's most visionary leaders in energy.

UH was also invited to join the Texas Medical Center as a full-member institution creating additional opportunities for collaborative work in health care.

HWM: Has the city embraced UH's Tier One ambitions?

Khator: Absolutely! Even in the economically challenging times we all face,

Houstonians have demonstrated a generous and, I believe, enlightened support of its premier public university. Annual giving to UH increased 27 percent in 2008 and 19 percent in 2009, rising from \$48 million to \$73 million during that period.

This unprecedented level of support is not just good luck. It is enlightened self-interest. We are doing a good job of explaining our ambitious plans – and considerable progress – to transform UH into a Tier One university. And Houston gets it, genuinely understanding this critical transformation simply won't happen without the community's support.

This community benevolence is taking place, I believe, because we share a simple but inevitable realization: making UH a better university makes Houston a better city. By now, it should be clear that our destinies are intertwined.

HWM: Can you identify specific initiatives that will set UH apart from other universities?

Khator: We are focusing on creating an Energy University for the Energy Capital of the World, on developing a health initiative that builds on and beyond our membership in the Texas Medical Center, on expanding our already exceptional arts programs, on fielding consistently competitive athletic teams and, crowning this all, on a commitment to Student Success that never loses sight of academic excellence and diversity. Of particular note in that regard is our emphasis on fundraising for scholarship support. During the past two years, we have raised \$18.4 million – more than double the previous two-year period.

The push for Tier One Scholarships has been a significant factor in that success. I'd like to elaborate on our commitment to Student Success, which is the driving force behind everything we do. With internationally recognized academic programs, renowned faculty, more than 300 academic majors and the opportunity for students to learn and study among a multitude of cultures and perspectives, our commitment to prepare students to succeed in today's knowledge-based global workforce is relentless. The ultimate goal is for UH to become an even more powerful engine of economic development for Houston and the state, providing even more globally prepared graduates who are productive leaders in the workforce and becoming a hub of innovation for testing new ideas and creating solutions to problems society wrestles with every day.

HWM: Who are some of the talented individuals you have recruited to the UH faculty?

Khator: During my tenure, we have recruited over 100 faculty members to the University of Houston. Ninety-five percent of them have been trained in Tier One universities and thus bring with them the culture and expectation of a Tier One environment. In addition, we have recruited two program clusters to UH, one in the area of health and the other in the area of energy. These clusters consist of 15 to 40 members and are headed by faculty who are national and global superstars.

HWM: You serve on the Greater Houston Partnership board and are active on its Workforce Advisory Committee. How is the university addressing current and future workforce needs?

Khator: We are working with industry to identify areas in which the University of Houston could offer new programs and meet the needs of the workforce. At the core of any degree is our promise that we will train students in the skills they will need to become leaders in the global economy. Research indicates that today's graduates are likely to have seven jobs and four careers in their lifetimes. It is, therefore, important that we sharpen their core skills and give them the confidence to adapt, analyze and innovate in new surroundings.

In addition, I have the privilege of serving with some of the world's most respected leaders on the Indian Prime Minister's Global Advisory Council. I have benefitted greatly from the exchange of ideas and perspectives among this group, and I take those back to Houston with me as I explore new avenues that might enhance the educational opportunities for our students.

HWM: How has UH benefited the community?

Khator: UH graduates 12,000 students every year and has a huge impact on the local community. As the job market has become international, crossing political boundaries, UH is providing the diversity and the skill set needed to compete effectively in the international market.

Research partnerships between nationally competitive research universities and the business industry are an important source of economic development in the form of technology commercialization, spinoff companies and job creation. The direct

effects of money invested in research multiply throughout the economy. One estimate is that \$10 million in research spending creates 334 jobs, \$8.6 million in wages, a half-million dollars in state revenue and \$13.5 million in local sales. An example of how research partnerships can transform not only a community, but an entire state, is the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, a 7,000-acre development that is home to more than 170 companies employing more than 42,000 full-time knowledge workers and an estimated 10,000 contract employees.

HWM: You just hired a new basketball coach and the football team had a highly successful season. How important is athletics to the university?

Khator: Athletics energizes not just the campus, but the community. It is an important part of the Tier One experience and in building our nationally competitive portfolio.

HWM: What does UH need most from the citizens of Houston and the state of Texas?

Khator: I would like to thank the people of Houston and the great state of Texas for their unwavering support for the University of Houston. We have strengthened and established significant partnerships that are helping us achieve our goals. For example, in the last Legislative session, the Greater Houston Partnership, which represents leaders of the business community of the city of Houston and the surrounding region, made designation of UH as a Tier One university its top priority.

I would urge the city to expect more from its largest public university and to remain steadfast in its pledge to transform the University of Houston into a Tier One university. Great communities build great universities, and the University is Houston is blessed to be in a great community.