

Report from the Academic Front:
The Faculty Senate Retreat Initiates Long Range Planning
by
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At its semi-annual Retreat on Feb 17th, the Faculty Senate initiated its efforts to cooperate with the administration to formulate a long range plan for UH. UH is poised to become a major research university, and the Senate is taking several steps to help. But in fact, it will take all the elements that make up UH to succeed. In addition to faculty, administrators, teaching and research personnel, and the Board of Regents have important roles to play. If we can achieve the aim of developing into a major research university, I believe UH will be unique in the nation to have risen from such humble beginnings.

Long range planning has been a missing piece in crafting the growth path of UH. On average, you can only accomplish something if you have a clear-cut goal. UH has uniquely positioned itself among US universities to turn itself into a top tier university, but we definitely are not there yet. What I mean by a top tier university is one comparable in quality to a Big Ten University, like Illinois, Indiana, or Michigan State. Another way of enunciating this goal is to say that we should be a better university than Texas A&M. This is a lofty goal, and one that will take more than one administration to achieve.

I believe, however, that a lofty goal of becoming a serious research university is both a reasonable goal, and attainable. Houston is a large and vibrant city. Our residents deserve access to a top-notch university, and Rice isn't doing it for Houston's population. Further, residents of the state of Texas deserve access to an excellent research university in a truly urban area. Not an overblown college town like Austin, nor a rural campus like A&M. The other reason that a top notch university in Houston is essential is because the city's economy needs a new growth industry. The petroleum age will end in the next 30 to 40 years, and the city economy will need a new key industry. The only source of that industry is the knowledge base that can be stimulated by a top notch university research.

The teaching function of the University is also stimulated by being an excellent source of new knowledge. Basic knowledge, like our introductory courses, can be taught by a large variety of people and formats. To think creatively, however, a person needs training. One of the best sources of training people to creatively solve problems is to interact with creative people. This is the specialty of research universities. As our research prowess grows, so will our teaching prowess. Not because researchers are such great entertainers- although some are- but because researchers are able to train people to think creatively, which is the cornerstone of the information age in which we now find ourselves.

The final advantage to Houston of a major research university is that the faculty can be an excellent resource for the business community. We do not generally value consulting in the academy, since a faculty member gets compensated for any outside work. But in fact, consulting is an important function to the business community, and especially to small businesses. The reason is that faculty represent a reservoir of expertise. Large firms can have staffs with a wide variety of expertise, but small firms cannot afford to build such a resource for only occasional use. Similarly for our local governments. A major research university fills this important gap in building major growth industries.

Thus all of our constituents need UH to become an excellent place to learn and to teach, and it's our duty, I believe, to build such a university. The final point, and a crucial one, is that I think the goal of becoming a top notch research university is attainable. UH has grown immensely, but until now all of our success has been UH pulling itself up by its bootstraps. But tuition has been de-regulated, meaning that we can differentiate our price from other Texas universities when the quality is there. And the Houston, and indeed national, business community has come to understand that it needs to support excellent university education to fuel economic growth.

A long range plan will need to contain a lot of parts. It will require quality undergraduate students, excellent graduate students, a fine faculty, an excellent physical plant, a wide range of administrative services commensurate with the students and faculty, and maybe even a college town. None of these things will happen by accident, and we need to prepare for them systematically, and sequentially. A central part of any such plan is a financing plan, with dates, numbers, and measurable objectives that provide yardmarkers on the journey. Yes, it will take a long time. But I think as a university, we have matured to the point where all of the groups within the university have coalesced around the objective of becoming a major research university, and thus I believe the faculty and the administration will work well together in crafting a coherent plan for the campus.