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Khator aims to make UH the school for all

AUSTIN — In a discussion on the future of higher education for the Texas Tribune Festival on Saturday at the University of Texas at Austin, the audience might have expected an earful of education technology, but President and Chancellor Renu Khator stressed the importance of inspiring the student body to graduate.

“Those who graduate from the University, they are outstanding alumni. They are so successful; they do very well,” Khator said. “However, I am very worried about those that are being left out — those who are not getting into college or those who drop out.”

Khator said she spends her first week of classes every year visiting classes of freshmen and transfer students to give them a simple message and to thank them for choosing UH.

“I (tell) them to look to (their) right, and (I say,) ‘Of the two of you sitting here, only one is going to graduate,’” Khator said. “I give them my email address and I tell them, ‘Before you think about dropping out, you will send me an email. I will not let you drop out.’”



President and Chancellor Renu Khator joined the panel on “Higher Education in 2038” at the Texas Tribune Festival on Saturday in Austin. Khator advocated for universities to prioritize student success when it comes to new technology. | Natalie Harms/The Daily Cougar

Part of the problem with the college dropout rate, according to former Texas Workforce Commission Chairman Tom Pauken, is that a four-year higher education institution is not for everyone.

“We can’t get trapped in the idea that the higher education solution is right for everyone, and I think there is too much of an elitist idea in Texas,” said Pauken, a 2014 candidate for governor.

Pauken used his family as an example. He said his son, who dropped out of college, had a passion for cars and didn’t warrant a need for a degree. His son now makes more than his school-loving daughter who earned a Ph.D.

Western Governors University of Texas Chancellor Ray Martinez said there’s a population who have put their education on hold indefinitely.

“Right now, we have at least 3.5 million adults who have started college and never completed a degree,” Martinez said. “They prioritized higher education at some point in their lives, and then life got in the way.”

Both UH and WGU Texas offer solutions to this group of people who might return to higher education as nontraditional students.

The issue then becomes providing them with a flexible learning environment, now that they have different priorities than a typical 18- to 22-year-old college student. One of the ways to provide this is through innovative technology and massive open online courses.

“Our student body is heavily nontraditional,” said Student Government Association President Cedric Bandoh. “When you have a population that has all those varying needs, you need to have a system there to support that. The online, the traditional and the hybrid models — all those different ways of delivering instruction are important to meet the needs of people.”

WGU Texas provides complete, career-focused online degrees, something UH is moving toward developing as necessary, according to Khator. For instance, the Subsea Engineering program is one of a kind. Therefore, it’s in high demand. The University is in the process of moving it online in order to educate more students, Khator said, but that is not the catch-all answer.

“We are doing so much more with technology, but I don’t think that there is one solution for every student,” Khator said. “When we have less than 30 percent of the adults in the state that are college graduates, there is room for trade schools, there’s room for massive open online courses. We can double up all of our efforts.”

The University is at a pivotal time in its history because of all its innovation and transformation, Khator said, and in 25 years it will have a legacy to look back on.

“We, at the University of Houston, look like what America will look like 25 years down the road,” Khator said. “We have this huge burden on our shoulders to make sure what I call this experiment is successful.”

UH’s demographic and how it uses its situation is going to set a precedent for itself and for other universities. Khator said she is working to make it a positive one.

“My dream and my hope is that we are able to use our location, our diversity, our drive, our economy and everything together to create something that people are able to use as an inspiration,” Khator said. “When you are the first one, you can be a successful role model or you can be a role model for failure.”

“I definitely want us to be flexible enough, to be aspirational enough and to be inspirational enough to make sure that we become a role model of success for higher education.”

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