

Tier one

Houston needs and deserves to have the state's next nationally ranked research campus

Everyone — politicians, university administrators and faculty members, the public — agrees that Texas needs more nationally ranked research campuses, commonly referred to as tier one universities. For a host of reasons, the University of Houston is the best candidate to reach the top rank.

UH is:

- Closer than any other emerging Texas university to joining the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University in the first tier. It already attracts more than \$70 million in external research grants per year. UH System Chancellor Renu Khator has set the goal of \$150 million in five years.

- Located in the state's largest metropolitan, which accounts for 25 percent of Texas' population and 32 percent of its economy. Students, jobs and supporting industry all are close at hand. Texas' most international city would benefit greatly from having a top-ranked research campus in its midst.

- Near the Texas Medical Center and its giant research engines. Texas A&M, however close, was moved to establish a biomedical research institute adjacent to the Medical Center. UH is already just down the road and has long conducted research with the institutions of the Texas

Medical Center.

- In partnership with the Johnson Space Center and collaborates with the engineers, scientists and medical personnel at the U.S. headquarters of human space exploration.

- The source of higher education for 35,000 students, most of them from the eight-county Houston area. No other emerging Texas research campus serves as many students or offers as many programs.

Reaching tier one will require an annual commitment of \$70 million from the state, but the state cannot finance the entire effort. Some UH alumni have given millions each to the school, but most give little or nothing. Tier one status involves substantial private giving, from the community and industry as well as alumni.

Supporters of other Texas universities point out that the Houston area already has Texas A&M, one of the state's two top tier campuses. However, A&M enrolls 48,000 students. It cannot grow without forfeiting excellence. The Houston area's population will add several million residents every decade. They need and can profit from a nationally ranked urban university that still has room for growth and can deliver quality education through distance learning and branch campuses.

More important than UH's hard-to-define status is its performance. As Chancellor Khator has noted, UH needs to increase its graduation rate and produce many more doctoral students. If the state continues to underinvest in higher education, UH must seek and acquire the needed support locally, like the Texas Medical Center does. As it is, UH is so impecunious it can't keep its nationally ranked departments — such as the Creative Writing Program — competitive against upstart programs springing up around the nation.

The problem with Texas higher education extends way beyond a shortage of top tier universities. Texas politicians say they support education, but the majority don't, preferring to cut taxes rather than seek excellence in teaching and research. At a time when tuition at Texas state schools is rising precipitously, posing a growing barrier for working-class students and their parents, the Legislature is actually cutting the amount of money it spends per student, adjusted for inflation.

The Legislature has a history of poorly serving the state's largest city. If nothing else, legislators should use part of the state's budget surplus to put Houston's principal university on the road to tier one.