

## Public universities in North Texas should work together on Tier 1 status

By MIKE NORMAN

Look carefully at a series of announcements coming from the University of Texas at Arlington over the next three weeks and you will see dramatically important news for North Texas.

It's a message with two threads:

UTA is spending millions of dollars on new and expanded research facilities. Research capabilities drive excellence at universities, attracting top teaching talent, graduate students and undergrads. Research grants bring more millions of dollars into the community, and business spinoffs from research further boost the local economy.

On Friday, UTA will open its new optical medical imaging center, four labs where five of its engineering professors will work on leading-edge biomedical research that one day could help doctors perform intricate surgeries or get a better view of cancer cells.

A key part of the significance of this announcement is that the new labs are not in Arlington but at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, where the UTA engineers will work with doctors to benefit patients. It's the first time that UT-Southwestern has dedicated space exclusively to an engineering school, and it's an important new collaboration between these two institutions.

The new facilities on the Arlington campus include a \$9.8 million civil engineering lab building and a \$145.7 million engineering and science research complex. They clearly reflect an emphasis on growth.

The research effort with UT-Southwestern is an example of what UTA President James Spaniolo says could bring a bright future for higher education in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

"In the 21st century, we need to look at new ways of doing things," Spaniolo says. "Let's not think of individual institutions. Let's think of clusters of institutions working together."

Local universities building themselves up through joint research efforts — what a smart idea.

'Tier 1' status

The gold standard among U.S. colleges and universities is referred to as Tier 1.

There's no single set of criteria for the ranking, but generally it includes spending more than \$100 million annually on research, awarding 250-300 doctoral degrees each year and offering doctorates in 50 or more academic areas.

Texas lags far behind other large states in its number of Tier 1 research universities. It has three, two of which are public: The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University in College Station. The third is private Rice University in Houston.

The Association of American Universities says that California has nine Tier 1 institutions. New York has seven. The Dallas-Fort Worth area, with 6.5 million residents, has none.

What's needed to change that, of course, is money.

David Daniel, president of the University of Texas at Dallas, told the UT System board of regents this month that it would take a minimum of \$70 million per year in additional incentive and matching funding to bring just one of the state's "emerging research universities" (a list that includes UT-Arlington and UT-Dallas) to Tier 1 status.

The cost of not building up those universities, the value of lost economic opportunities, is harder to tally. Still, we know this: In 2006, Daniel said, 10,163 Texas high school students left to attend doctoral-granting universities in other states. Similar institutions in Texas attracted 4,358 high school graduates from other states. That's a net brain drain of 5,805 Texas students going elsewhere.

Working together

Spaniolo is clearly proud of UTA today and enthusiastic about its growth plans. Besides the new buildings, he points out that UTA has brought on board an additional 75 tenure-system faculty members in the past four years.

He agrees with Daniel that Texas needs to do more. If there will be additional Tier 1 universities in Texas, UTA wants to be among them, and Spaniolo believes his university can win that prize.

But he says that's not going to happen quickly. Besides money, it takes years to expand programs, recruit faculty, attract the brightest graduate students and build up necessary scholarship programs that pull in the highest-ranking students coming out of high schools.

The state can't provide all of the needed money. UTA is expanding its private fundraising efforts. Local community support is important. And UTA's 420 acres sitting on top of the Barnett Shale, with six natural gas wells already drilled on one campus site, could prove to be a huge advantage.

Meanwhile, Spaniolo wants the Dallas-Fort Worth region to recognize the strength that it has in its three UT System institutions and the University of North Texas. The three UT schools, governed by the same board of regents, have a unique opportunity to capitalize on their geographic proximity and create alliances, he says.

If that idea needs more incentive, consider that the Texas Legislature smiles on collaborative efforts that make good use of existing facilities. That means a better chance of obtaining funding.

Historically, collaboration between Dallas and Tarrant counties has been difficult to achieve. Maybe that helps explain why there's not a Tier 1 school here.

"If we remain unified, we have a much better chance of achieving our goal," says Spaniolo.

"If not, we are capable of undermining ourselves."

The next Tier 1 university? If there is one, it's likely to be one of these emerging research universities:

Texas Tech University

University of Houston

University of North Texas

University of Texas-Arlington

University of Texas-Dallas

University of Texas-El Paso

University of Texas-San Antonio

Source: David Daniel, UT-Dallas, UT System

Mike Norman is the Star-Telegram /Eastern Tarrant County editorial director. 817-685-3870