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CHALLENGE AT UH

The school is ambitiously aiming to attract better students, hoping that more will make it a 'university of first choice'

Raising the recruiting grade

By MATTHEW TRESAUGUE
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On a recent Friday, the University of Houston hosted one of its monthly open houses — a chance for prospective students and their parents to visit campus and meet with admissions counselors.

While one official listed the university's finer points, including the racially diverse student body and award-winning faculty, Alfonso Olvera sat in the back of a half-filled room, listening.

Olvera would not be here if the University of Texas at Austin or Rice University already had accepted him. But he was waiting for their answers, and there was more to learn about his third choice.

"I'm treating this as a backup," Olvera said.

His interest might be only lukewarm, but he is just the kind of student the aspiring research institution is trying to reach. To rise in national stature, UH wants to become "a university of first choice" among smart students, particularly those who just miss automatic admission to UT-Austin and Texas A&M University as part of the top 10 percent of their high school class.

"The students in the top 20 percent are still good students," said Susanna Finnell, director of admissions at UH. "We're hoping we can corner that market."

UH has launched an aggressive effort to bring in students with better academic records and from places beyond Harris County. This year, the university raised admissions standards, hired additional recruiters and scheduled more visits to high schools in Austin, Corpus Christi, McAllen and San Antonio.

The university wants to enhance its Honors College, hoping the intellectually vigorous environment will attract more top students. At the same time, recruiters will promote the one-on-one opportunities that students have with professors.

A more academically prepared crop of students could help UH improve its six-year graduation rate of 40.2 percent, which some campus leaders think is a key reason the 35,000-student university is not ranked higher by various college guides. U.S. News and World Report, for one, lists UH in the fourth tier of national universities.

Provost Donald Foss, however, downplayed the role of the rankings in the new recruitment push. "It is a result, not a goal," he said.

Out-of-state rivals

Though UH intends to offer scholarship packages that compete with UT-Austin and Texas A&M, Foss said he considers its primary rivals to be the universities of Arkansas and Oklahoma and Louisiana State University, among others.

Several out-of-state universities intensified their recruitment efforts in the Lone Star State after the adoption of a 1998 law that promised admission for students who finish in the top 10 percent of their graduating class to the Texas public university of their choice. Those who missed the cut appeared ripe for the taking.

Under UH's new criteria, which applies to first-time students seeking to enroll next fall, those who rank in the top 20 percent of their class will earn automatic admission. The university also will accept some students who rank outside the top 20 percent but possess a two-part SAT score of 1,000 or an ACT score of 21.

It's too early to tell the impact of the new requirements on the number and quality of applicants, Finnell said. Before the change, the academic caliber of UH students had improved slightly.

About 35 percent of the freshman class, which included 3,044 students, ranked in the top 20 percent of their high school class in 2000. Five years later, 40 percent of the 3,385-student freshman class finished in the top 20 percent of their high school class.

Social life an issue

Still, the ongoing challenge is getting students to enroll. Some students have concerns about the quality of the education and the social life at a university at which less than 10 percent of undergraduates live on campus. The percentage of accepted students who eventually enroll has dropped from 56 percent to 45 percent since 2000.

Of those admitted students who snubbed UH this fall, 49 percent said the university was not their first choice. The freshmen who did enroll were not asked whether UH topped their list of desired schools.

The university's recruiters have found that UH is not well known, even in Houston. They tell students about studying in Texas' largest city, about the nationally ranked business school, about the sparkling new recreation center and well-manicured campus.

If they can persuade the students to visit, then the chances of enrollment increase, Finnell and college-guidance counselors said.

"Students, especially those from Houston who haven't been there because of the area of town, are pleasantly surprised," said Julie Rollins, a counselor at Episcopal High School, which generally gets all but a few of its seniors accepted at four-year universities. "The key is to get them on campus."

During a recent visit, Darius Berry Jr., a prospective student from a Dallas suburb, said he was impressed with the diversity of the student body and the appearance of the campus. He is leaning toward UH over two universities closer to home.

'A better impression'

Olvera, who plans to study business, had not seen UH before attending the Cougar Friday event this month. He is ranked in the top 12 percent of his graduating class at The Woodlands High School, which sent the most students of any Texas high school to UT-Austin this fall. The number of Austin-bound Woodlands graduates outnumbered those headed to UH 2-1.

After reading several college guides, Olvera had some concerns about how the university is perceived outside Houston.

A student-led tour of the campus did not sway him.

"The only thing we learned about is the gym," Olvera said.

His outlook, however, changed after spending about an hour in the Bauer College of Business. Among other things, advisers showed him the college's center for investment management, which includes a \$5 million laboratory that includes 16 trading stations.

At the end of the day, UH remained his third choice. But Olvera said he could see himself attending the university.

"It gave me a better impression," he said.

matthew.tresaugue@chron.com