

SWOT Assessment for UH-Downtown

STRENGTHS

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

The university's greatest strength is the quality of its academic program. The foundation of UHD's undergraduate curriculum is a general education program that all students must complete. Its 37 undergraduate programs and seven graduate programs are academically rigorous and designed to serve the employment needs of the student and the community. The university is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award bachelor's and master's degrees. The College of Business holds accreditation by the prestigious American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business while the campus's engineering technology programs in Control and Instrumentation Networks, Structural Analysis and Design, and Process and Piping Design are accredited by the Technology Accreditation Commission of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology. The Urban Education program has had consistently high pass-rates on the teacher certification exam.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

UH-Downtown is committed to serve the educational needs of its diverse urban constituency. The university does not view access and excellence as mutually exclusive values, but believes that providing opportunity to a culturally and ethnically diverse group of students enhances the overall quality of the educational experience. Students come to UHD with various levels of academic ability, but all are held to the same rigorous academic standards. To prevent its "open door" from becoming a revolving door, all new students are tested in reading, writing and mathematics prior to registering for classes so that they will be enrolled in the appropriate level of course. In addition to formal course instruction, the university offers a variety of support services through the Academic Support Center. These special support programs give educationally disadvantaged students the opportunity for earning a college degree they otherwise would not have.

STUDENT DIVERSITY

A special strength of UH-Downtown has been, and will continue to be, its diversity. Individuals from all the basic demographic categories of age, sex, religion, class and income can be found at UH-Downtown. This highly heterogeneous mix of students enriches the classroom experience and social experience and provides excellent preparation for the contemporary work place.

POSITIVE ENROLLMENT TRENDS

One basic measure of a university's success in meeting student needs with quality programs and support services is its enrollment. UHD's headcount enrollment has increased from 9,704 in Fall, 2001 to 11,484 (uncertified) in Fall, 2005, a five-year increase of 18 percent. UHD continues to have considerable success in meeting the educational needs of those who have been denied educational opportunity in the past. Between Fall 2001 and Fall 2005, Hispanic enrollment grew by 31 percent, African-American enrollment grew 13 percent and Asian enrollment by 17 percent.

GROWTH IN GRADUATES

Degree production has also increased significantly. During the 2004-2005 academic year, the university awarded 1,647 undergraduate degrees, a 29 percent increase over the 1,280 that were awarded five years earlier. During this same time period, the number of minority graduates increased from 608 to 901, an increase of 48 percent. The minority category with the greatest increase were Hispanics at 69 percent. The number of students who came to the university from community colleges and went on to graduate jumped 37 percent since 2001, from 463 to 636.

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

UHD offers its students opportunities for undergraduate-level research. Resident research centers currently include: The Scholars Academy, The Center for Applied Polymer Science Research in Natural Sciences, and The Center for Computational Science and Advanced Distributed Simulation in CMS. Cooperative programs with area institutions like the University of Texas-Houston Health Science Center, Baylor College of

Medicine and UTMB provide UHD's undergraduates with additional research opportunities during the summer. In addition, degree programs throughout the university often require a senior thesis, portfolio, and/or seminar project which enable students to work on research projects under the direct supervision of a faculty member. Many of these projects are presented at the university's annual Student Research Conference. UHD students also regularly present their theses/research at national conferences.

HIGH QUALITY FACULTY AND STAFF

The quality of UHD's academic program derives from the excellence of its faculty and academic support personnel. Ninety-two percent of the tenured and tenure-track faculty hold terminal degrees. Faculty have received national and state awards for their scholarly contributions and for excellence in teaching. Staff provide committed, professional support of UHD's education mission, obtaining Title 5 and other grants to expand student services, develop the institution's IT infrastructure, and provide services for student and faculty at a notably high level of efficiency.

COURSES FOR A VARIETY OF SCHEDULES

UH-Downtown's commitment to access is reflected by the times, places and formats in which it offers its courses. Classes are offered from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. weekdays as well as Saturday mornings and afternoons. UHD's weekend and extensive night offerings provide many working students an opportunity to achieve degrees and other educational goals. To provide greater geographic access, the university offers classes at the University Center in Montgomery County and at the University of Houston System Teaching Centers at Sugar Land in Ft. Bend County, and at Cinco Ranch in West Houston. UHD's growing number of online courses offer students additional instructional flexibility and access. In Fall 2005, the total number of undergraduate SCHs generated by Internet and taped courses was 4,173, an increase of 11 percent over the previous year.

PRE-COLLEGIATE PROGRAMS

UH-Downtown lends its expertise to the community for the purpose of improving the quality of pre collegiate education. Through school partnerships, particularly with institutions on Houston's mostly Hispanic north side, UHD provides summertime enrichment programs and scholarship help, dramatically increasing college going rates. The nationally acclaimed Ketelsen Institute for Academic Excellence (previously titled the Jesse H. Jones Academic Institute) offers Project GRAD students from five at-risk HISD schools the opportunity to participate in a four-week academic enrichment program that supports and enhances their high school curriculum, helps prepare them for college, and acculturates them to a university environment. Other programs such as Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Houston PREP are also creating new opportunities for inner-city public school students.

TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

The university's commitment to ongoing implementation of standardized desktop computing support, networking infrastructure, security infrastructure, computing lab and electronic classrooms, and technical support services positions the university to take advantage of new technologies to improve instructional and administrative services. . One example of the use of technology to assist students is student e-services. Accessed through UHD's website, student e-services gives students the ability to request and update information, obtain status reports, access online courses and support services, and take care of business transactions with the university on a 24-hour, 365-day basis. UHD was recognized in a 2005 Intel survey as one of the top 50 "Most Unwired College Campuses" in the United States.

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY

UHD has made instructional technology and distance education support high institutional priorities. During the past few years the university has substantially upgraded its web capabilities and expanded its support of online courses. The university is supporting 32 ITV courses serving 76 receive sites in the Fall 2005 semester. The number of fully online courses has increased from 41 in Fall 2004 to 54 this fall. In addition, instructors in 443 face-to-face and ITV classes have activated WebCT course shells in another 443 sections, giving them the opportunity to use WebCT as a supplemental instructional technology. This is more than

double the 190 sections using WebCT last year. UHD has made great strides in achieving a reasonable level of structure for ITV and online course support that address current needs and can be adapted as needed to address a continuing pattern of gradual growth. Addressing support needs will become more of a challenge and require more resources if the university intends to develop programs and strategies to increase distance education enrollment to a significantly higher level, support new remote sites or explore new opportunities as they arise.

TRANSFER PARTNERHIPS

To support seamless transition among institutions, UHD has established partnerships with local community colleges. Joint admissions programs, articulations, and other initiatives streamline the transfer process. For instance, the UHD and NHCCD Joint Admission program enables eligible students to be admitted to and enrolled at both institutions, earning credits toward an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree at the same time. The Department of Urban Education has developed a three-way partnership with Cy Fair College and Cypress Fairbanks ISD to recruit teacher candidates into the joint admissions program that will be responsive to district needs. Other agreements to facilitate the transfer process are anticipated with additional institutions.

WEAKNESSES

FUNDING

Higher education funding in Texas is behind that of other large, industrial states. Within Texas, UHD is last in the state appropriations it receives per FTE student. UHD's state funding is approximately 35 percent below the state average for other four-year institutions. Tuition revenue, which now and for the foreseeable future appears to be the primary source of new funding, currently accounts for 34 percent of UHD's FY2006 operating funds, up from 30 percent in FY 2004. Since UHD is committed to removing financial barriers to higher education and providing access to all segments of the Houston community, it cannot continue to increase its tuition and fees to the extent that other universities can and still remain true to its basic mission.

SALARIES

The university raised average salaries by rank and discipline (as reported in the annual CUPA Faculty Salary Survey) to the average amounts paid at other public masters level universities, but recruitment in the more competitive disciplines as well as salary compression remain a serious problem. The university's merit pay policy makes it difficult to provide appropriate rewards for those exhibiting truly exceptional performance. The university's staff pay plan remains under-funded and does not track the market trends in Houston. For the 2005 – 2006 academic year, the university was able to give a 4% across the board raise to staff. However, salaries and pay scales in a number of areas remain comparatively low. The university is in the process of issuing an RFP to conduct a staff salary study this year, in an attempt to address this issue.

LACK OF DIVERSITY AMONG FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF

While UHD has had more success in recruiting minority faculty and staff members than many universities in the state, it recognizes that its urban mission gives it a special obligation to recruit from candidate pools representative of all groups in society. In Fall 2005, 5.4 percent of the university's 224 tenured/tenure-track faculty were African-American, 8.5 percent were Hispanic, and 12.9 percent were Asian. The African-American and Asian percentages dropped slightly from what they had been in 2004 while the Hispanic percentage increased.

HEAVY RELIANCE ON ADJUNCT FACULTY

The university's goal is to teach at least 60 percent of its undergraduate SCHs with tenured or tenure-track faculty. The university has approved enough new positions to reach this goal if all of these positions were filled with faculty teaching at least the average number of SCHS taught by faculty within their departments. Despite these additional positions, the actual T/TT coverage remains under 50. Coverage rates by department range from a low of 39 percent in English to a high of 78 percent in Urban Education. The State Performance on lower division class coverage is also discouraging. The percentage of lower-division courses

being taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty fell to 34.3 percent last year from the 36.6 percent the year below.

LIMITED SUPPORT FOR FACULTY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Last year the university implemented a funded leave program on a pilot basis, but faculty research and professional development support remains limited. Institutional support for faculty research and development is approximately what it was five years ago even though the number of faculty members has increased dramatically. Newer faculty members need greater research support to meet the expectations for promotion and tenure while long-term faculty members need experiences that will help them keep current in their teaching fields. Faculty increasingly also require access to electronic journals and databases for research that cannot be supported by the library with its current funding level.

LIMITED SUPPORT FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Technological change along with the growing size and complexity of the university require staff members to acquire new knowledge and develop new skill sets in order to carry out their jobs, but little support is provided beyond in-house training classes. The university does not provide the kinds of staff development opportunities that many universities rely upon to retain and attract new employees.

INADEQUATE STAFFING IN CRITICAL SUPPORT AREAS

The university has had a difficult time in recruiting and retaining qualified personnel in critical support areas like Student Affairs and Information Technology. Difficulty in addressing staffing shortages and implementing important organizational adjustments to address growth in student population and changes in business and educational practices, particularly in critical support areas, represent a serious impediment to institutional progress.

SPACE SHORTAGES IN ALL MAJOR AREAS OF UNIVERSITY OPERATIONS

The dramatic growth of the university in recent years has resulted in space shortages throughout the university. Classrooms, faculty offices, and offices and work areas for key support areas are all inadequate. The Library is especially hard-pressed, with only 63 percent of the space that the Coordinating Board predicted it should have. The Natural Sciences Department lists insufficient laboratory space as its most fundamental weakness. Even with the opening of the Commerce Street building, the university has a space deficit of more than 255,000 square feet according to the Coordinating Board's Space Deficit Model. The Shea Street building will reduce the space deficit by 85,000, but with the continued enrollment growth, UHD's space deficit is projected to remain above 200,00 square feet as it enters FY 2008.

GRADUATION AND RETENTION RATES

The university's full-time, first-time-in-college student graduation rates are among the lowest in the nation. This year's 16.67% six-year FTIC graduation rate was three and a half percent higher than the 13.12% six-year rate reported last year, but still short of the 22.51% target. Part of this year's increase was due to changes in how the definition of who should be included in the tracking cohort. UHD's retention rates are also low compared both to national averages and the average retention rates at peer institutions. While students participating in special programs like the university's Scholars' Academy are retained at rates well above the state average, the university's overall one-year FTIC retention rate of 61.02% is still 10 percentage points below it.

PROGRAM EVALUATIONS AND OUTCOMES ASSESSMENTS

The university established a process for reporting the assessment of student outcomes and committed itself to conduct periodic program reviews in 1995. While some areas have developed meaningful effective instruments, assessment activities remain uneven. Of particular concern has been the lack of documentation showing the kinds and amount of student learning that is taking place in the university's various programs. The university also has failed to follow through in a very systematic way on regular program reviews. During its compliance audit conducted as part of its SACS Reaffirmation of Accreditation process, the university acknowledged it was not in full compliance with several different standards regarding program assessment.

LACK OF SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS TAKING COURSES DURING “NON-BUSINESS” HOURS AND AT OFF-CAMPUS SITES

The expansion of classes offered through the Weekend College and in the evenings has created a need for a corresponding increase in faculty and student support services. There are also a number of unmet specialized support needs brought about by the university’s growing involvement in distance learning.

PARKING

Providing adequate park is a major challenge for all urban, commuter campuses and UHD is no exception. While the number of spaces has been expanded, the ease and safety with which the different parking lots can be accessed varies. The Washington Street lot poses special access problems. While the new Shea Street project includes a parking structure that will increase the net number of spaces available, the surface parking now available at the site of this project will be lost during construction. A longer-range challenge will just be adding the additional parking spaces to keep up with the university’s growing enrollment

IMAGE AND IDENTITY

UHD’s affiliation with the UH System carries with it a number of benefits, but also causes confusion about UHD’s status in the system as a free-standing university with its own distinct mission. The university enjoys much greater respect and support today than it did in its early years, but there are those who still view it as a branch or satellite campus of UH. This “identity crisis” has been the documented rationale for denial of funding from several major funders in the greater Houston area during the last academic year. The attempt to brand the university as UHD or as UH-Downtown has resulted in the word “University” not appearing in the name anywhere adding to the confusion about what we do. The press frequently reports the good achievements of UHD as being attained by UH. The lack of a “brand identity” clear and distinct from UH significantly hampers our ability to build our own reputation and base of community support based on the our quality academic programs and achievements.

PLANNING PROCESS

Because units operate under plans that were developed at the beginning of the preceding fiscal year, they are limited in their ability to respond to new opportunities and address unexpected needs. The time lag between plan development and implementation also poses problems when a unit gets new leadership wishing to reorder its priorities.

OPPORTUNITIES

A COMMITMENT TO “SMART GROWTH”

In the past, an overly limited view of its mission has sometimes prevented the university from promoting its educational strengths to the very kinds of students who were most likely to benefit from them. The university has had no clear set of enrollment goals other than over all growth. UHD is now positioned to be a university of choice for students coming from many different academic backgrounds. The success of the Scholar’s Academy shows that the university can become more intentional in its recruitment practices and can help shape the kind of growth it will have by the policies and practices it follows.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE OPPORTUNITIES

Community colleges constitute the fastest growing sector of higher education. UHD is committed to the concept that community and senior colleges should be joined in a seamless web and continues to work make the transition from one level of institution as easy as possible through articulation agreements and joint admission programs. UHD also is exploring the establishment of BAT and BAAS programs that would allow students to earn a baccalaureate degree after they have completed two-year technical programs at the community college.

ALUMNI PARTICIPATION

As an emerging force of 18,217, UHD alumni have become one of the university’s most promising resources. Unlike the early years of UHD’s existence, when the alumni base was still very small and our graduates were just beginning their careers, the university now stands to benefit from the immense potential of this alumni

base, as active supporters and advocates of their university. In order to utilize this emerging force, UHD must continue to communicate and engage our alumni, cultivating these relationships into quantifiable positives, for the mutual benefit of all parties involved.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

The dramatic increase in the last five years in the number of UHD students taking courses online and off-campus demonstrates the importance of distance education in providing access to higher education for both new and currently enrolled students. In Fall, 2005, 8.8% of UHD's students were taking at least one course online, and a total of 12.2% of its students were taking at least one course online or at one of the off-campus locations. Distance education opportunities include the expansion of existing teaching centers, the development of new teaching centers and the expansion of delivery of coursework online.

COLLABORATIONS WITHIN THE UH SYSTEM

The success of the UHS teaching centers at Sugar Land and Cinco Ranch demonstrates how the universities within the UH System can work together to address the board's strategic priorities. The UHS System Strategic Plan assigning UHD responsibility as lead institution to develop a new collaborative teaching center in the Northwest Houston metropolitan area will give UHD the opportunity to serve additional student markets.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Changing demographics pose critical challenges for all educational institutions. Educational forecasts suggest that 2008 will produce the greatest number of high school graduates in the nation's history with sustained high numbers for several successive years as a result of the baby boom echo. In addition, while the traditional white, middle-class 18-22 year-old group is declining in size, the numbers of minority students and older returning students will be increasing. Those groups who will be increasing most constitute the core of UH-Downtown.

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

This transformation of the Downtown area provides UHD with an opportunity to achieve wider community recognition, throughout Harris County and the Houston metropolitan area, of its unique institutional identity and degree programs. The continued expansion of the light rail to the north side will have a number of consequences for UHD.

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The establishment of an Office of Sponsored Programs, UHD's expansion into graduate education, the increasing number of faculty-led study-abroad programs, the availability of special study-abroad scholarships, and the overall growth of the university have provided the university with a good foundation for significantly strengthening the international education component of its curriculum and expanding its ties with foreign universities to provide additional study and research opportunities for students and faculty. Many UHD faculty have had international education experience and are eager to develop additional programs in this area.

THREATS

HIGHER EDUCATION A CONTINUED LOW PRIORITY FOR STATE FUNDING

Like all state-supported institutions, UH-Downtown is dependent on the state legislature for a significant portion of its funding. General revenue funding as a percent of total university expenditures continues to decline and is projected to continue to do so.

PHILANTHROPIC FATIGUE

Various national disasters have created a new non-stop barrage of frenzied fundraising activities causing many philanthropic organizations to back away from any requests that are not generated by the funding agencies themselves. This compromises stewardship activities and limits access to those with who the

university has not yet established a relationship. In the corporate sector, the educational support that does exist is increasingly targeted toward K-12. While there is a general understanding that the increased costs for a college education are being borne by the student, there is also an increasing reluctance to provide unrestricted scholarship funding.

MANDATED EXPENSES

Mandated expenditures for the university also continue to climb. While the state cut its general revenue support of the university in FY2005, it increased mandated expenditures by approximately \$1,065,000. This amount included \$905,000 in mandated grant and scholarship support, \$106,000 in Workman's compensation-related expenses, and \$54,000 in rider reductions to the appropriation bill. In addition to these state mandates, UH System charges increased by \$108,000 in FY 2005. Unfunded mandates in areas ranging from salary increases to safety improvements to technology standards can also impose significant costs on the university.

PREPARATION OF STUDENTS

The inadequate academic preparation of some new students is an issue at many universities. The problem is especially acute at UHD because of its open admissions policy and traditional recruitment practices. Because a significant number of new FTIC students come to UHD with serious academic deficiencies, a large amount of institutional resources must be committed to remedial instruction and support services. The Coordinating Board's Master Plan for Higher Education would make the college-prep curriculum the standard curriculum for all students and will require its completion for admission into any of the state's four-year universities. The long-range implications of these new rules for UHD remain unclear.

LIMITATIONS IN FACULTY RECRUITMENT/RETENTION

A combination of factors limits UHD's ability to recruit new faculty and retain extant faculty: UHD's 4-4 course load exceeds that of many state universities, including the other three UH system campuses; and the very limited research and faculty development budgets, impedes faculty members' ability to remain current in and contribute to the knowledge base of their respective disciplines. While hiring and retention issues create immediate difficulties in staffing courses to meet the increased demand created by enrollment growth and in achieving desired levels of tenured/tenure-track coverage, they also create impediments to developing new programs (especially at the graduate level) and meeting SACS and AACSB accreditation criteria.

UNCERTAINTIES REGARDING AVAILABILITY OF FINANCIAL AID

UH-Downtown is committed to eliminating economic hardship as a barrier to participation in higher education. Approximately 5,000 UHD students receive some form of financial aid and with the increase in tuition and fees, the number of students needing aid is projected to increase. With an increase in fees and tuition more students will be needing financial aid if they are to complete their education.

INCREASED COMPETITION FOR STUDENTS

The Internet offers universities throughout the country to come into the Houston area and compete for students with their online programs. There is also a trend developing nationwide for community colleges to be granted authority to grant bachelors degrees in high demand areas such as teacher certification and other fields. Because of the price differential between community and four-year college, UHD would be at a serious disadvantage in competing with community colleges for student seeking a bachelor's degree.

CAMPUS SECURITY AND SAFETY

A number of factors have coalesced to make campus safety and crime prevention problematic at UHD. The campus police force continues to be understaffed. The combination of the officer shortage and problems with reporting procedures has resulted in poor communication both within the department and between the department and the rest of the UHD community. UHD's expanding campus also poses security problems. The remote parking lots and the non-contiguity of the Shea Street and Commerce Street buildings with the rest of the rest of the campus will further tax the overextended police force and will lengthen police response times. The perception that the campus is unsafe, whether based on fact or not, damages its reputation and makes both student and faculty recruitment more difficult.

NETWORK AND INTERNET SECURITY

The need for reliable and secure technology has become increasingly important as the university continues to increase the integration of technology in its overall operations. The university must be prepared to respond to the resulting challenges such as, individual privacy, copyright compliance, misuse of resources, and disaster recovery. Increased wide area communications will also result in greater vulnerability to unauthorized system access. The university must further develop its security infrastructure and resources to maintain a reasonably stable and reliable technology environment, and to protect its critical data and systems.

REPORTING AND REGULATORY COMPLIANCE

New reporting and compliance requirements can place a significant strain on the university's limited resources. For example, evolving compliance and reporting requirements pertaining to information security, privacy, disaster recovery, and business continuity are requiring a significant amount of resources. The state's accountability reporting continues to rely on effectiveness measures more appropriate for institutions serving a traditional, full-time student body. UHD appreciates the need to improve accountability but believes that many of the standard performance measures have little relevance to UHD's urban mission.

GROWTH-RELATED THREATS

Because UHD's continuous enrollment growth has transformed the university into a mid-size institution, the university now faces a series of intensifying challenges: internal campus space deficits for instruction, faculty, and staff; external space deficits for parking and access; and mushrooming costs, from software licenses to staff, in infrastructure and support for on and off campus locations. Opportunities for further campus expansion may be limited because development in the northern downtown area is driving up real estate prices. To meet the state goal of expanding educational access to Texas citizens, the future challenge is how to improve educational quality while sustaining growth.