William Flores, President of University of Houston-Downtown: Thinking BIG

by Melissa Campbell

As the saying goes, everything is bigger and better in Texas. That couldn’t be more true than at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD), one of the fastest-growing universities in the state’s largest city. It recently welcomed its third president, William Flores, Ph.D., and for Flores, bigger and better are themes that have been prominent throughout his life.

UHD’s student enrollment is 12,000 and growing — as is the city that houses it. Currently the fourth largest city in the U.S., Houston’s growth rate puts it on track to surpass Chicago, currently the third-largest city.

While Houston does not have a single central business district, the downtown district has experienced rapid growth and expansion in the last few years. Major corporations such as Chevron, Continental, JPMorgan Chase, Exxon and Shell have operations in Downtown Houston, contributing to the district’s 150,000 workers employed by approximately 3,500 businesses. Home to the MLB Astros and the NBA Rockets, Houston boasts one of the largest theater districts in the country, as measured by the number of theater seats.

As an urban university, UHD’s borders between campus and community are actually quite porous. The early UHD aimed to meet the unique needs of the community’s dynamic and diverse work force. During the 1990s, UHD focused on becoming a “premier, metropolitan university” appealing to traditional and nontraditional students as well as working professionals.

Well aware of the university’s history, Flores is looking to build UHD into a bigger and better version of itself, meeting and anticipating the needs of its current and future students. To do that, he will draw on his impressive and varied career in the California and New Mexico higher education systems.

As an education visionary, Flores has always thought big. He earned his undergraduate degree in political science from University of California-Los Angeles, then completed a master’s degree in political science and Ph.D. in social theory and public policy at Stanford University.

From his early years as a faculty member at Stanford, Santa Clara University and California State University-Northridge before becoming provost of New Mexico State University, where he also served one year as interim president. Other work experience included serving on the El Paso branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas and being executive director of the Gardner Community Health Center in San José, effortlessly navigating the spaces between commerce, education and social service.

After his six-year tenure at New Mexico State University, where his accomplishments included increasing enrollment, creating a distance-learning program and opening a satellite campus in Albuquerque, Flores was tapped by New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson to become deputy secretary of the state’s higher education department. In this role, he took on the massive task of working with college and university presidents and provosts to create a seamless transfer and articulation process to make it easier for community college students to move to four-year institutions. This was accomplished by creating a uniform method of assessing student transcripts via a common course numbering system.

In addition, working with high school superintendents, teacher unions and faculty unions, he facilitated the creation of a statewide dual-credit program so that high school students could earn college credits that would be accepted at any state school. Bringing all the stakeholders together to discuss what had been a heated issue with both “turf” and financial considerations, Flores was able to bring about solutions that met with the approval of all parties — in a little less than a year. Through the creation of legislative amendments, Flores was able to formalize the arrangements, which ultimately were for the benefit of the state’s students.

Tackling an issue this big was impressive enough, but successfully penning a solution in such a short time is a testament to Flores’ resolve, passion and people skills. It’s no wonder Richardson called Flores one of the country’s greatest educators.

For Flores’ part, he sees these traits as critical to the success of any college or university leader. “A president must be able to work with a wide variety of constituencies and be successful in building partnerships,” he said in a UHD press release.

“Urban universities like UHD,” he said, “must also engage with the surrounding community. “University campuses are vibrant centers of art and intellectual growth, but they have an opportunity and an obligation,” he said, to be active in the cities of which they are a part.
One of the reasons he came to UHD, he explained, was that there was “lots of activity, lots of energy” on campus and in the city. He also was drawn to the cultural diversity of the student body, which is 36 percent Hispanic, 28 percent African-American, 22 percent White and 10 percent Asian. The varied ages of the students, with only about one-quarter of traditional age, contributed to the vibrancy of the campus.

“The university was also very focused on meeting the specific needs of the urban Houston community, and my time at Cal State and New Mexico University gave me insights into the challenges faced by students in urban areas.”

His vision for UHD involves facilitating the varied pathways to success for each of the student segments: first-time freshmen, who make up only 7 percent of the student body; transfers, who account for nearly two-thirds of enrollees; nontraditional students who want to resume and complete a degree program; and professionals looking to finish or earn a second degree.

“Community partnerships can help pave that pathway through professional development programs with neighboring businesses as well as dual-credit and dual-enrollment options through community college partners,” he explained.

A variety of distance education options through online classes and a hybrid class configuration, which blends online and classroom instruction, is another way UHD is responding to the needs of its students.

The Scholars Academy, geared toward STEM majors, provides students with ample opportunities to conduct research, present papers and benefit from faculty mentoring that leads to academic success. Indeed, many graduates of the Scholars Academy go on to pursue graduate degrees. According to Flores, based on its success, this model is being exported to other programs within the university.

Other aspects of the university that play an important role in securing a pathway to success include a desirable 20-1 faculty-to-student ratio, small class size, a student/peer mentoring program, extensive internship opportunities with downtown businesses and an active club system that links many club activities to the surrounding community.

Flores sees success for the university sitting squarely at the intersection of campus and community. If he could be known for one thing as president of UHD, it would be that he helped build the university of the future by meeting the needs of the students, the state and the nation 10 to 15 years down the road, and by doing so, UHD became known nationally for helping students to succeed.

The price of not succeeding, at UHD and nationwide, he says, is far too great. “The most pressing issue for our country as a whole is to increase graduation rates,” he said. “The graduation gap costs this country nearly three-quarters of a trillion dollars, due to the negative impact on the economy. It’s in all of our interests to close the gap or people will not be able to hold the jobs we need to succeed as a country.”

As an adjunct to closing the graduation gap, Flores believes that the pipeline for professors and administrators needs to be bolstered as well. “Students need to see successful role models to ensure their own success,” he explained.

His own early role models who set him on his course were his parents. “I was inspired to pursue an education when my dad, encouraged by my mom, earned his GED while working and raising a family,” he said. His mother would always buy books, he explained, and while she couldn’t afford to buy an entire set of encyclopedias, she took advantage of a special promotion at the local grocery store: customers who spent at least $20 in groceries could purchase one volume of the set for just 99 cents.

The goal of having a complete set of encyclopedias was a big one, to be sure, but one that was attainable with the proper vision, resolve and patience. It is clear that Flores not only acquired his passion for education from his parents but also his ability to think big, even if it requires smaller, incremental steps along the way.

In his new role at UHD, Flores is already thinking big and, if history is any indication, is well on his way to achieving his goals, for the benefit of not only his students, but for the city, state and nation, ensuring a better future for us all.