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University of Houston

School amid the high-rises

By Carol Frey

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Houston rises before the sun, hits the freeways, and heads for work. The University of Houston is a hard-working place as well: Three quarters of its students come from the area, and even more stay on to work after graduation. One of the campus's anchors is the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, which takes a typically practical approach: Students help operate a hotel, a conference center, and two restaurants.

Career considerations were key when Natasha Ostaszewski, 19, now a second-year architecture student, was picking a college. "I'm interested in design, and the UH architecture program is based on design rather than engineering," she said. A scholarship that covers housing on campus helped, says Ostaszewski, who comes from suburban Sugar Land, and a third plus was that Houston isn't much of a party school (the city's nearby Montrose district, she says, offers enough distractions).

Still, making connections on an urban campus is generally tougher than in college towns. Most UH students commute to their classes (just 7 percent live on campus), and students identify more with academic groups than with social ones—Ostaszewski says she has gotten to know other architecture students well in studio classes and on building projects in small groups. But the university is trying to bring people together, building new housing to lure more students out of the suburbs, bringing football games to the main campus (the Cougars were the 2006 Conference USA champions), and providing gathering and studying space for students at a new recreation center with two fancy swimming pools.

UH also offers students ways to connect across academic boundaries. Its Texas Learning/Computation Center allows for high-tech collaborations between students and researchers in different disciplines. In one lab, students play a computerized physical fitness game designed by their professor, Ioannis Pavlidis, to help sedentary workers prevent obesity. Another project uses computer imaging so that experts from New York can critique the work of

art students.

UH started as a junior college in 1927 to serve the sons and daughters of Houston's working men and women, says Bill Monroe, who has taught English at the university for 20 years. Since the 1960s, it has turned into a research university without forgetting its origins. Monroe notes that fewer expensive cars are parked in UH student lots than at some other campuses, but the caliber of student is high. "Many who come here are very independent minded," Monroe said. "They're risk takers."

UH Cougars

Key facts: Wide ethnic diversity

Undergrad enrollment, fall '06: 27,400

Est. annual cost, '06-'07 (tuition, fees, room and board): in state: \$13,327; out of state: \$21,577

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