Rice truly is stepping out from behind the hedges

Rice education includes a ‘Passport to Houston’

By DAVID W. LEEBRON

FROM its inception, Rice University has been engaged with Houston — great research university and great city — in a symbiotic relationship. It is the presence of a university like Rice that makes a city a center not only of production and commerce, but of ideas — ideas that, in turn, ultimately support the growth of commerce and culture.

Arriving from New York to become president of Rice University, I found historical resonance in the words of the university’s first president, Edgar Odell Lovett:

“Houston — heavenly Houston, as it has been happily named by a distinguished local editor of more than local fame — you will find in some ways a bit too close to New York, perhaps, but here you will find many a heartening reminder of the memories and traditions of the South, and all the moving inspiration in the promise and adventure of the West. Here, in a cosmopolitan place, in a community shaking itself from the slow step of a country village to the self-conscious stature of a metropolitan town, completing a channel to the deep blue sea, growing a thousand acres of skyscrapers, building schools and factories and churches and homes, you will learn to talk about lumber and cotton and railroads and oil, but you will also find every ear turned ready to listen to you if you really have anything to say about literature or science or art.”

It is time for those of us at Rice to fully recommit our university to engagement with Houston. We are doing much, but we can do more — we must do more — for the future of Rice is inextricably bound up with this great city. As a matter of educational philosophy, civic responsibility, and competitive advantage, Rice must be fully engaged with Houston and capitalize on all it has to offer.

Whether it is attending an exhibition in the Museum District that neighbors our campus, participating in a public service internship with a government or nonprofit organization, or hopping on the light rail to enjoy any number of Houston’s diverse cultural and culinary offerings, Rice students must view the city as an integral part of their experience on an urban campus. To foster this, we plan to provide to all our undergraduate students next year a Metro pass, coupled with museum memberships and cultural information that together we will call a “Passport to Houston.” It will, in fact, be a passport to an important part of their education.

A significant portion of our research endeavors must focus on the problems of Houston, from its educational challenges to its environmental issues, and we must play a part in solving them. We must build further collaborations — with the Texas Medical Center, with the cultural and artistic institutions that surround us, with the political institutions of our city, county and state, and with nonprofit organizations that seek to serve our community.

Rice’s educational responsibilities also extend to our city, and our School of Continuing Studies has served it well. An important part of our task is providing education in the skills needed by those engaged in commerce, government and the arts. But it cannot be limited to that. We must provide education that increases our community’s understanding of our complex world and its appreciation of humanistic values. That is the responsibility of a great university in the modern metropolis.

In short, the hedges that define our campus must be sources of aesthetic beauty, not barriers to the engagement of Rice and Houston.

Likewise, Houston and Rice, together, must see no barriers to the world. Our city’s international companies and institutions, and the third-largest consular corps in the nation, are striking proofs of Houston’s growth in global importance and its recognition as a world city. And from its founding, Rice has served as an international “port” for Houston through which art, ideas, and people from around the world flowed in. We bring international students and professors from 87 countries, many staying to contribute to Houston and America. By graduation, 42 percent of Rice undergraduates have Rice-sponsored international experiences in countries quite literally around the globe and in every habitable continent. Our partnerships with universities and the research of our faculty span the globe.

Both Houston and Rice were built on a belief in progress. We set ourselves the goal of continuing that progress, by making our city the very best it can be, by educating the world citizens of tomorrow, and by creating the knowledge that will lead to enlightened understanding, which will, in turn, lead to a betterment of our city, our world and the lives of the people who inhabit them.

Leebron was inaugurated Oct. 2 as the seventh president of Rice University.