SARAH Simpson chose to attend Rice University despite Houston.

Back home in San Marcos, a cozy college town south of Austin, Simpson had heard few kind words about the state's largest city. But she wanted to stay in Texas and study architecture at a top school.

"The fact that it was in Houston was something I was initially willing to sacrifice," Simpson said.

On the eve of her third year at Rice, the 20-year-old Simpson has a new view of her adopted city. Houston is a place where she can drink tapioca teas, watch art films and study the skyline.

What makes a city good for living and learning is wildly subjective, as local university officials well know. Though Rice has placed increasing importance on Houston as part of the undergraduate experience, the city, known elsewhere for smog and sprawl, remains the university's biggest impediment in the nationwide competition for talent.

Fewer students applied to join the freshman class this fall than last year. Of those who requested an application but did not apply to Rice, the leading reason was its "location in Houston, Texas," according to the university's research. Texans preferred Austin and Dallas while out-of-state students expressed an overall aversion to the state.

"It's one of our ongoing concerns," said Robin Forman, dean of undergraduates at Rice. "We believe Houston should be a draw for our students. It's a wonderful collection of resources."

Among college towns, Boston wraps itself in Ivy League tradition, Berkeley, Calif., is quirky, and College Station closes down for Texas A&M University football games.

Wide variety

Houston offers theaters, museums, 21 Fortune 500 companies and a wealth of internship opportunities, the kinds of amenities that fueled a surge of applications in New York City, making it the hottest place to go to college a decade ago.

Even with the resurgent interest in an urban education, students have been slower to find Houston, which claims 13 colleges and universities inside the Interstate 610 Loop. There are nearly 18 students per 1,000 residents of the greater-Houston area, compared with 37 students per 1,000 residents of New York.

Rice received a record 8,106 applications for admission last fall, producing a freshman class of 727 students. But the university's inability to attract more applications this year troubled administrators, who want the private research institution to be a destination for top students from Texas and beyond.
About 53 percent of Rice's undergraduates are from Texas. David Leebron, the university's president, has said he wants 60 percent of the student body to come from out of state.

"We haven't exploited Houston as much as we should," said Maryana Iskander, a Rice alumna and adviser to the university's president. "The city makes it easier to attract a more diverse student body."

Advertising opportunities

To confront Houston's image, Rice officials gave the city a starring role in the school's two promotional videos. One video starts with a 90-second tour of downtown on a sun-splashed day, showing the Philip Johnson-designed Bank of America Center, the Alley Theatre and the inside of a clean MetroRail car. The other video devotes more than two minutes to Rice students, from such places as Atlanta and Seattle, showering praise upon Houston.

Shawn Leventhal, for one, wanted out of the cold of his New York City suburb when the time came to choose a university. He limited his choices to schools "south of the Mason-Dixon line" so he could run in shorts in January.

At Rice, he knew he would be warm. But he did not know what else Houston had to offer.

"I expected it to be tumbleweeds and cowboy boots," said Leventhal, who found museums, music and good food. "I didn't expect this urbane place. I didn't expect this diverse place. I didn't expect the arts. Coming from New York, I didn't know."

After graduating in May, he decided to stay and work for an advertising agency that created the city's newest unofficial slogan: "Houston. It's worth it."

Changing assumptions

Rice is not alone in its efforts to promote Houston as a place to attend college. The University of Houston also is putting new emphasis on its hometown to lure students with better academic records and more geographically diverse backgrounds.

"There isn't as much to offer in Bryan-College Station as there is in Houston, and we're trying to take advantage of it," said Darcie Champagne, director of marketing at UH, which draws about 80 percent of its roughly 35,000 students from the city and surrounding counties.

The recent efforts of Rice and UH reflect the changing interests of students, who seem more interested in the excitement of the big city and internship opportunities than before. Nearly 50 percent of freshmen last fall said the prospect of a good job factored into their selection of a university, according to a survey by the American Council on Education and University of California at Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute.

"People probably think of Austin more as the center of the state's academic life," said Becky Thilo, of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, who decided to go to Rice because of its proximity to the Texas Medical Center, "but there are a lot of opportunities here."

Tiffany Abdullahi, a 19-year-old mechanical engineering student from Memphis, Tenn., said she chose Rice over 15 universities, including Stanford and Cornell, in part because of its location.

"Keeping my eye on the prize, I knew that once I graduated, I would probably have better employment opportunities if I went to a school in a big city," Abdullahi said. "Since Rice is a well-respected university in Houston, I figured that many firms in Houston would probably lean favorably toward Rice alumni, and I would
probably have a better chance with the alumni network if I stay close to the school I graduate from."

**Leaving the hedges**

For years, Rice sold prospective students on its academic reputation and small size, not its location. Unlike New York University and other urban institutions, Rice is modeled after Thomas Jefferson's vision of the American university - a pastoral campus with stately buildings laid out in geometric symmetry around a grassy quad.

Among those who study and work at Rice, a popular phrase is "beyond the hedges," meaning the world outside the confines of the leafy campus. The university, in many ways, had walled itself off from its surroundings.

When Leebron, a former law school dean at Columbia University in New York, arrived at Rice last year, he expressed a desire for a closer relationship between the university and Houston.

His early actions included the creation of the "Passport to Houston, Version 1.0," which provided students with a Metro pass, unlimited access to the Museum of Fine Arts and a Web site that lists cultural events with free or discounted tickets. A Metro analysis showed that students used the bus and light rail system more than 45,000 times between January and May.

**Downtown downside**

The university also changed the schedule of its shuttle service, adding Saturday afternoon routes from the nine residential colleges to a nearby Target and Fiesta grocery store and offering rides from Rice Village's bars and restaurants after midnight on weekends.

To encourage freshmen to leave campus, orientation activities last week included scavenger hunts in downtown, picnics at Hermann Park and an Astros baseball game.

When classes resume Monday, so will group date nights at the Angelika Film Center.

Abdullahi said she appreciates Houston's "cultural richness" but wishes the city offered more for students.

"Downtown should be the prime representation of a city, but Houston's downtown falls short," she said. "My friends and I find little reason to travel downtown unless there was some special event or a good flick at the Angelika. In fact, Rice is great about having events on campus for students on the weekend, but Houston offers little for the average college student to enjoy."

At the same time, Simpson, the architecture student from San Marcos, found more than she expected, a living classroom beyond the hedges.

"Houston has the skyline one wants to study architecture," she said. "It is still growing, and because of its no-zoning policy, experimental growth is occurring all over the place. ... This wasn't something I thought of much at the time I first enrolled, but now that I'm aware of the copious opportunities available, I know it was a wise decision."