A merger of Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine will benefit Texas Children's Hospital to heal sick children

Dear Colleagues,

Last week, the boards of Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine announced that they will continue their merger discussions, with a four-month extension (through January 31, 2010) of the Memorandum of Understanding that provides the framework for their talks.

When Presidents David Leebron of Rice and Dr. Bill Butler at Baylor first shared this decision with me, I told them how pleased I was by the news. Although Baylor has faced some considerable financial challenges over the last couple of years, it, without question, remains one of the nation’s elite medical schools. The continuation of these discussions is certainly a bright light on the horizon of Baylor's future.

But what really excited me most was the prospect of what a merged Baylor and Rice would mean for Texas Children's Hospital, and for our commitment to heal sick children, here in Houston and around the world.

As an admired leader in medical education, Baylor boasts some of the world’s top researchers in fields that will drive tomorrow's cures. Rice has long been recognized as one of the country's most prestigious universities and is particularly renowned for its contributions in the sciences and engineering.

Combining these two institutions would create an academic and research powerhouse that any city would be honored to call its own. As a CEO in the Texas Medical Center and a very proud Houstonian, I want to see this merger happen.

But even more important than the organization created by a merged Rice and Baylor would be the amazing work this combination would produce. Looking at the collaborations that already exist between the two provides a glimmer of what would be made possible by an even deeper relationship:

- Led by Baylor/Texas Children's Hospital cardiovascular surgeon, Dr. Charles Fraser and Rice bioengineering professor Dr. K. Jane Grande-Allen, the institutions have partnered to form the Center for Cardiac Valve Disease. Among the center's projects are efforts to grow new heart valve and valve tissue for use in pediatric surgical procedures.
• Dr. John Oghalai, clinic chief and director of The Hearing Center at Texas Children's Hospital, and Dr. Robert Raphael, associate professor in bioengineering at Rice, are exploring the use of lasers to stimulate auditory neurons in those who have experienced hearing loss.

• Dr. Jianhua Yang, member of the Texas Children's Cancer Center and assistant professor in Baylor's Department of Pediatrics, and Dr. Andrew Barron, professor of chemistry and of materials science at Rice, are developing new intracellular drug delivery mechanisms for the treatment of neuroblastoma, the most common extracranial solid tumor in children but one to which delivering drug treatment is notoriously challenging.

• Dr. Debananda Pati, member of Texas Children's Cancer Center and assistant professor in Baylor's Department of Pediatrics, and Dr. Jane Tao, assistant professor of biochemistry and cell biology at Rice, were provided a grant by the Simmons Collaborative Research Fund to study the role of the protein separase and how it impacts breast cancer tumor cells.

In fact, nearly half of the proposals submitted this year for the second round of Simmons Collaborative Research Fund grants involve teams from Texas Children's, Baylor, and Rice.

A merger would only encourage even more collaboration among the gifted investigators at Rice and Baylor. And, of course, the ultimate beneficiaries of this combination would be those who could be helped or healed by the medications, procedures, treatments and therapies developed by this spectacular entity: the children that all of us at Texas Children's Hospital are dedicated to serving.

It's for that reason more than any other that I strongly favor a merger of Baylor College of Medicine and Rice University, and I encourage you to join me in that support. While I haven't spoken to every one of our physicians about these discussions, I have received feedback from many, and I'm pleased that they share my enthusiasm for the incredible hope and possibility this merger would create. Together, these two institutions, along with Texas Children's Hospital, would form one of the world's driving forces in science and medicine, developing the cures that will help us - and pediatric specialists everywhere - to realize our dream of a worldwide community of healthy children.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Wallace