

**The University's quest for excellence:
It's about students, faculty and the state**

By Tom Sullivan and Robert Jones

The University of Minnesota's strategic positioning plan is about better serving our students, faculty and the state. Although the plan is aimed at making the university one of the top three public research institutions in the world, it's not about bragging rights, as measured by rankings – although rankings are an important way to track progress and results. It's about excellence, as measured by more student success, faculty achievement and quality of life for all Minnesotans.

The changes in academic programming and administrative services proposed to President Robert Bruininks touch on every aspect of the university: all of its campuses, colleges, departments, courses and services. Attention zeroed in initially on one or two parts of those recommendations, but that shortchanges what President Bruininks and other university leaders are attempting to accomplish. At stake is no less than the university's ability to educate the citizens and leaders of the future and conduct the research breakthroughs that save lives and enhance livelihoods.

As many of the university's most distinguished professors said in a letter to Bruininks last week, "The great universities of the 21st century will look very different from those of the last. It is within our power to make the University of Minnesota one of the world's great centers of scholarship."

Because we are proposing sweeping change, we are encountering some questions, and understandably so. Why now? Why take on so much? Why once again propose changes to General College? Let's take a look at the answers.

Why now? Because a convergence of economic, demographic and global challenges will push the university into mediocrity if we do not anticipate and get ahead of them. The state's share of the university's revenues has fallen to about one quarter of its budget, with tuition expected to shoulder a larger share of that burden than the state for the first time within a year or two. While we appreciate efforts by the governor and Legislature to restore some of the nearly \$200 million in funding we lost in the current biennium, we do not expect fiscal pressures to ease. At the same time, the federal deficit is putting resources such as research grants and student financial support under pressure even as competition increases among public and private institutions for those dollars.

Demographic changes are just as compelling. Although we have capacity for only about 5,300 of the more than 20,000 students who applied for admission next fall, in the coming years the number of high school graduates is expected to decline by 10 percent. At the same time, the state will experience a significant divergence of racial and ethnic patterns that includes a 19 percent decline in the number of white students and a 52 percent increase in the number of students of color. These and other changing

demographics like aging will affect the needs of our future students, and we need to be prepared to deal with them.

As we fight for resources and deal with domestic changes, global challenges are growing, too. Emerging economies like China and India are investing heavily in higher education. We are in global competition for the best and brightest students and faculty.

If the University of Minnesota does not face boldly into these challenges, it will lose face. The Star Tribune reported that we already are slipping in key measures like faculty awards and other recognition. Why does that matter? It takes a highly respected university to attract the best faculty, students and research grants. With some 40 percent of our faculty within retirement age over the next decade, we need to be aggressive in recruiting the best and brightest replacements. And, as the article pointed out, for that we need to be a top tier research institution – a talent magnet for faculty and students.

Why take on so much? Because if we don't, we'll rightfully be accused of picking low hanging fruit but missing this pivotal moment in the history of the university and our state. The letter from the group of leading professors in fact called the proposed changes "modest in scope" and said "many other changes, some bolder" will be necessary to make the university a premier institution. The process is just beginning: The recommendations submitted to President Bruininks last week provide a solid, broad start, but they also call for ongoing work to make even our best performing programs even better.

We know we need to do a better job helping Minnesotans understand that the university is the only public research institution in the state, while other states share that role among several institutions. In Minnesota, the university brings in more than 98 percent of the research funding that comes to higher education in this state. If it loses ground to competing institutions outside the state, research resources and capacity will be lost, which in turn creates a downward spiral as top faculty, graduate and undergraduate students go elsewhere for work and study.

Why General College? General College was formed more than 70 years ago to assist students who didn't have access to some of the coursework needed to prepare them for a university education. Then, the state lacked the other higher education institutions such as the community and technical colleges that now can be found in every region. In fact, we need to, and intend to, make better use of these excellent options for students who are not prepared to succeed in a large, complex research university environment – but who may be ready after a couple of years of study at a smaller institution.

We believe that General College has important developmental education and academic programs, taught by caring faculty and staff, which will do better when integrated into the broader resources of a larger collegiate environment. Separating these faculty members and students has not produced acceptable results: Graduation rates for General College students are less than 8 percent after four years; fewer than a third graduate in six; outcomes are even worse for students of color. Minnesota is the only university with a

separate two-year non-degree granting college as an entry point, and a substantial body of research supports the view that it is more effective to integrate students with extra needs into the mainstream of educational and cultural life of a university vs. serving them separately. If we are not willing to acknowledge shortcomings and seek better alternatives, we will do a huge disservice to the very students General College seeks to help.

Integrating General College into a larger educational format does not mean we are closing the university's doors to students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds: Increasing diversity remains one of our top priorities. The university will continue to admit motivated students who need academic assistance and have the potential to earn a degree. Key to diversity is removing financial barriers, and President Bruininks has made scholarships his top fundraising priority. Most recently, he launched the Founders Opportunity Scholarship to ensure that no qualified students are kept away by financial limitations.

We have also pledged to work "up stream" by forming even closer partnerships with the pre-kindergarten through grade 12 system to improve all students' preparedness for a university learning environment. Students need to know from their earliest days in the classroom that they should aspire to a post-secondary education and do the coursework and study that will prepare them for that opportunity. In fact, with strategic positioning, we are pledging to improve educational attainment by improving advising, mentoring and support services for all of our students, including creation of a university-wide writing institute and honors college.

Changing the structure of the University of Minnesota does not change our values or our commitment to access. We were established 154 years ago to provide education, research and public service to the people of this state. The question is whether we ride on our laurels and settle into comfortable mediocrity or seize the moment. As the Star Tribune noted in an April 4 editorial, "The university's first duty in the 21st century is to position Minnesota for leadership in a knowledge-based economy, by being as powerful a magnet for top-notch students and faculty as it can be."

That is what the changes underway at the university aim to deliver. We do not believe that Minnesotans will or should settle for adequacy when excellence is within their reach.

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