Mary Jane Smetanka,  Star Tribune
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Thirty-one eminent University of Minnesota professors have endorsed plans for a leaner and more elite university, adding faculty firepower to proposals made earlier this month.

In a letter to President Robert Bruininks and the Board of Regents, chemistry Prof. Jeffrey Roberts wrote that he and others who signed the letter "express our strong endorsement" of plans to embrace a new culture in a drive to become one of the top three public research universities in the world.

Signatures include four Regents Professors -- the highest honor accorded a university faculty member -- and 27 Distinguished McKnight professors. The McKnight honor goes to gifted midcareer and junior faculty members.

The university plan does not have support in all quarters. Under the proposal, General College, which offers underprepared students a portal to the university, would be closed and become a department in the College of Education and Human Development. Faculty and students are organizing a campaign to save that college.

In May, Bruininks will send proposals for changes to the Board of Regents, which will vote on the issue in June. The president has said he is pleased with task force reports that, among other things, propose merging three colleges with other units, creating an Honors College and a College of
Design, intensifying attention to undergraduate writing and a longer-term reorganization of biological and environmental sciences.

Roberts said the letter came out of a faculty lunch conversation. "It seemed important to us that a group of academic leaders stand up and support the idea that the university should aspire to be the best it can be," he said.

In the letter, the faculty, many from science and engineering, urged Bruininks to quickly name membership to groups that will work on reorganizing sciences, asking for significant faculty involvement and a process that listens to university stakeholders. "It is within our power to make the University of Minnesota one of the world's great centers of scholarship, but only if we unlock the creativity and imagination of our whole community," they wrote.

Officials in the Colleges of Human Ecology and Natural Resources, which would be absorbed by other units, say they will go along with the plans. But General College has turned its website into a battle plan, with a letter from the dean, talking points and a blog for college supporters. The site urges people to contact legislators and regents and write letters to Twin Cities newspapers.

A rally in support of the college is planned for next week.

Mary Jane Smetanka is at smetan@startribune.com.