Bruininks discusses plan

The Daily sat down with President Bob Bruininks to talk about strategic positioning.

By Anna Weggel

A task force recently presented a set of recommendations to University President Bob Bruininks about the future of the University.

Those recommendations include a controversial plan to close General College and dismantle the College of Human Ecology.

On Monday, The Minnesota Daily sat down with Bruininks to talk about some of these issues.

How does negative feedback affect your decision-making?

I am trying to listen to the entire University community and people outside the community on the recommendations of this report, so I’m taking all the advice, and the comments, and suggestions I get very seriously as I formulate my recommendations for the Board of Regents.

Past University presidents have had similar visions but have been unsuccessful because of public outcry. How is your plan different?

The plan is different in many respects. First of all, it’s a plan that contains 31
separate recommendations that touch nearly every academic college on the Twin Cities campus and the coordinate campuses of the University of Minnesota.

Secondly, the plan is very thoughtful in terms about what is recommended and the process for implementation.

In every one of these recommendations, there’s a process for further study and a clear strategy for implementation that I think will be very successful one to two years in the future.

**You have said before that you don’t think the General College model works. Why? If it doesn’t work, why doesn’t the University fix it instead of getting rid of it?**

Colleges on the University of Minnesota campus are generally much larger than General College. There are many academic departments at the University that are larger than General College. It has 35 faculty members.

So these recommendations would take three rather small colleges in the first stage and integrate them into larger academic units to create stronger centers of leadership around areas of teaching and research, lower the cost of operating the University, protect students in the process and lead to better results.

I don’t believe General College is the model for the future of the University of Minnesota.

Its graduation rate after six years is 30 percent. Its graduation rate after six years for students of color is 20 percent. By their own reports, nearly 50 percent (of General College students) indicate they would not come back to the University of Minnesota if their only option was General College.

So I don’t think it’s the right kind of model for the future. We need to increase the access of students from very diverse backgrounds in our society to successful learning and successful outcomes at the University.

This is all about improving success, and we believe the General College could be more successful in a newly configured academic department, and, more importantly, our students will be more successful in the long term, and the University will operate at significantly less cost.

**There has been concern about the University’s diversity level if General College is cut. What do you plan to do to preserve diversity at the University if this is the case?**

The University has and will continue to have a very strong plan to maintain the diversity of our student body, our faculty and our staff, and that is the commitment of the University of Minnesota.

The University enrolls a significantly greater percent of students of color than any other system of higher education in Minnesota and at least 2 1/2 times the percent of students of color who are prepared and indicate an interest to pursue higher education. We will continue to do that.
How are admission standards changing? Will it be more difficult to get admitted to the University? How will this affect the number of students in colleges?

It will increase the number of students who are admitted to separate colleges. The University intends to keep its admissions levels at least from 5,300 to 5,500 freshmen per year.

We will also increase the number of transfer students who are eligible to attend through a cooperative agreement with the community-college system.

The admissions process and criteria will be the same process we have now. It emphasizes academic preparation, academic achievement and your scores on tests, but it emphasizes much more than that: leadership a person shows in high school, in the community; and a person’s academic, ethnic and economic background.

We do give people some credit if they come as first-generation college students. These are called “secondary credits”; they’re very important.

They’re the same admissions criteria … and the same process will be used in the future.

That process will emphasize maintaining the same level of access to the University in terms of the numbers of students who enroll here and maintaining our same emphasis on recruiting a very diverse student body from all types of cultural and economic backgrounds.

The other thing that is somewhat different is we are undertaking a total overhaul of our financial-support system for students, and we are putting much more money into supporting low-income students who have the ability and the preparation to benefit from the University.

Pell-eligible freshmen will be able to study here tuition-free starting in the fall of 2005.

The recommendations include 30 initiatives. What are some of the most important initiatives that haven’t gotten much attention?

There are several recommendations that deal with improving the academic climate and support for students.

They have to do with developing a challenging honors curriculum for students across all of our colleges, providing much greater emphasis on the improvement of writing as a condition for graduation, greatly increasing financial support, scholarly support for students who are prepared to succeed at the University and have financial need, and improving the levels of academic support, advisement and career services.

There’s a second set of recommendations that deal with the design of the University.
Some of these recommendations deal with General College, but many of them deal with the College of Human Ecology and the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture coming together to create a new College of Design.

It’s a college that deals really with lifelong education and development from the early stages of life and to areas of adult education and learning.

A third area of very substantial redesign of the University deals with the broad area of food systems, the environment and renewable resources.

That brings together a conversation involving the College of Natural Resources, the College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences, the College of Biological Sciences, and perhaps the Institute of Technology.

And in that cluster of recommendations is also one to develop a University-wide institute, Environmental Science and Policy, which we think will be one of the first such institutes in the entire United States.

These are all areas where the University has established priorities, where the University is academically strong, where the state has very substantial interest and needs, and where we have the opportunity to be among the very best in the country.

The regents recently voted for the University to become a top research institution. How is being a top research institution measured? How will the community know when and if the University ever reaches that point?

This is the big million-dollar question.

There are many ways you use to measure how good you are as a university, but the measures we care most about are measures that have to do with progress and performance.

There are … other measures that have to do with the financial condition at the University of Minnesota.

And then, finally, there are a set of measures that will do with the University’s role in society.

Every year, we report to the Board of Regents on our progress, and we will identify in that report the most significant measures we feel are important to observe and track as we go forward.

In a recent survey, Minnesotans said they are more interested in the University serving the state than becoming a top research institution. If this is how Minnesotans feel, why is the University still vying for the goal? How are you going to get across that the goal is beneficial?

Residents … emphasized the very things that we believe go to the heart of defining a great university.

How well do we do in education with our undergraduate students, graduate and
professional students? They rated that with a level of impact that was in excess of 80 percent.

They talked about the importance of research and research discoveries to the state’s economy and quality of life.

They talked about the impact of the University on the state, its needs, the solution of problems, improving the economy and quality of life.

When people evaluated individual attributes they thought were really important at the University, they rated at 80 percent or better the very things that go to the heart of defining why the University is a very special place and why it is the only research university in Minnesota.

And so, people have argued there’s a disconnect between what Minnesota citizens want and what the University is aspiring to become, and that is simply not true.

If you look at what people want the University to accomplish, those are the very things that are right in the heart of defining excellence in a university of this type.

So I think there is tremendous congruence between the judgments of Minnesota citizens and the aspiration to be among the very best universities in the world.

I think that goal is very much in keeping with the exceptional level of the state’s economy and quality of life.

**How will becoming a top research institution affect the University’s relationship with the Legislature? What do legislators think about the proposed plan?**

So far, the response from … the Legislature has been very positive.

It’s been equally positive and enthusiastic in terms of Minnesota citizens, civic and business leaders.

So, I think … people find it refreshing that the University is willing to step out and set very high goals for itself and its future.

I believe it will strengthen the University’s case in the Legislature, because it will indicate to the state the special quality and importance of the University and the consequence to the state’s long-term future of maintaining the quality and strength of the University.

In a global economy, a research university is absolutely indispensable to your competitive position.

**How will the proposed changes improve the University? Is it just about prestige and, if so, why is that most important?**

It’s all about results. It’s all about getting better.
It’s about continuous improvement and getting better each and every day by setting high aspirations and achieving better results.

What we regard as status and standing will correspondingly improve. It’s all about improving education of our students, their satisfaction, their learning.

It’s all about improving the quality and impact of the University’s research, and it’s all about improving the University’s contribution to society.

And if there are rankings and positions that need to be assessed, they will largely take care of themselves if we do our work in maintaining the excellence and quality of the University of Minnesota.

The e-mails you send to the University about strategic positioning use language that is difficult for students to understand. How can you better inform students about the changes going on at the University?

I think they should read the information that they can find on the University Web site.

We should continue to have the kinds of meetings I had with student leaders and student groups last week and that I plan to have well into the foreseeable future, and they should get really engaged in these discussions.

We’re inviting them to send us their views, their ideas, their suggestions, and then, finally, when we make decisions and decide to move forward in particular areas, I want students strongly engaged in the process.