University of Minnesota President Robert Bruininks on Friday unveiled "the most sweeping recommendations" to come out during his long tenure there -- changes that will affect "every facet of academic life." The goal: to become one of the top three research universities in the world.

Under the proposal, the university would create an Honors College to attract top undergraduate students. It would coordinate research and teaching in the sciences and technology and expand opportunities for international studies.

But in the process it will become leaner -- and some say meaner.

The plan would reduce the Twin Cities campus' 18 colleges to 15 by July 1, 2006. That includes the elimination of General College, a traditional gateway to the university for underprepared students, many of them minority and low-income students.

Bruininks wants to fold General College and elements of two other smaller colleges -- the College of Human Ecology and the College of Natural Resources -- into larger, more comprehensive programs that, he said, would better serve students and do a better job ensuring their academic success.

For a university that has seen its state funding battered and cut over the past several years, Bruininks said his plan could
save about $20 million over the next three or four years. More important, he said, it provides a blueprint for reconfiguring the university into a leaner, better-functioning institution of research and learning.

Said Bruininks: "This is a reform initiative because the current practices are not working."

His plan is a virtual copy of recommendations made by two task forces that studied the university's future. Reaction to the recommendations has been largely positive, both inside and outside the university. Except the plan for General College.

"This is just a thinly veiled attempt to remove a very positive program," General College Dean David Taylor said after the task force announcements. "I can't find an alignment between where the university wants to position itself as a world-class institution and the threat that this college poses."

General College faculty members and staff members have vowed to fight for their program. On Wednesday, about 10 students were arrested after refusing to leave after a sit-in in Bruininks' office. On Thursday, the Minneapolis Urban League and the Council on Black Minnesotans held a meeting to discuss their concerns. Last month the Minneapolis City Council passed a resolution asking that General College stay open.

But, Bruininks said, if his plan is fully implemented it will improve the quality of education for all students at the university. While about half of General College's 1,800-student enrollment is made up of minority students, Bruininks said it is not serving as a pathway to success. The college is not a degree-granting program and students must transfer to other colleges. But only about half of General College students transfer to degree-granting colleges in two to three years and only about 31 percent graduate in six years.

Bruininks said his plan will not decrease minority student enrollment, nor back off the university's commitment to diversity, but it will do more to ensure that students succeed.

• First, through 2007-08, students who would have enrolled in General College will be able to enroll in both a degree-granting college and General College programs. This move, Bruininks said, will ensure that students are immediately put on a degree track while also getting the study and social support that General College provides.

• Second, he wants to increase financial aid to low-income students, do more outreach with Minnesota's pre-K through
12 schools to prepare students better for college, and improve coordination with the state's two-year colleges to help students make a smoother transition to the university for their final two years.

• Third, Bruininks recommends creating a vice president for diversity position for improving recruitment, retention and success of a diverse student body.

The report will officially be presented to the university's Board of Regents next week, with a public hearing set for May 16. The board is expected to act on the report in June.

"I see this as the first installment of a very exciting agenda," Bruininks said Friday.

David Metzen, chairman of the Board of Regents, said: "I'm withholding all comments until [Bruininks] presents this to us next week. I want to hear his recommendation, see him eyeball to eyeball and then I'll have a reaction."

Asked what university observers will say about his school years from now if his plan is implemented, Bruininks said: "I think they will say the University of Minnesota is deeply committed to raising its profile and joining the community of the very finest universities in the world. And I think parents and students will see it as a very strong indication that the University of Minnesota is going to offer educational opportunities second to none."

*The entire report can be found at [www.startribune.com/261](http://www.startribune.com/261).

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