Editorial: Building a great U/Strategic plan is on right track

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The rollout last week of a new "strategic positioning plan" at the University of Minnesota was a sit-up-and-take-notice moment for those who want to maximize higher education's contributions to this state.

Every strong university president has made one big, somewhat controversial push to upgrade the reputation and quality of Minnesota's higher education flagship. As of last week, count Robert Bruininks among them. The plan he introduced may lack the catchy titles some of his predecessors employed. But it can stand alongside the best of them.

One could also say that it flows directly from several of them. Strains of "Commitment to Focus" and "Access to Excellence" can be heard in this plan's ideas for attracting better-prepared students, increasing academic rigor and improving administrative efficiency. The new plan's ambitious aim to move the University of Minnesota up to rank among the top three public research universities in the world is also a next-step progression from the goals other presidents set.

But if history repeats itself, those positive features could be obscured in coming weeks by a furor over one other renewed motion: the elimination of General College.

Previous university presidents have proposed its phase-out, only to have alumni and friends of the two-year college preserve it. After 35 years at the university, Bruininks
knows that story well. Yet he's trying again, and has the recommendation of an internal task force to back him up.

That alone ought to tell General College's defenders something. So should the fact that no other public research university in America has what amounts to a community college imbedded within it. Seven community colleges and a state university are flourishing in the Twin Cities today, something that was not true when General College was established in 1932.

But what should be most troubling about General College is that it is poorly delivering on its promise to take academically ill-prepared students and make University of Minnesota graduates of them. Six years after they enroll, only 31 percent of General College students have a university degree. Starting their college study in what Bruininks called a "highly segregated learning environment" isn't working for most.

Under the plan, General College would be absorbed into a new College of Education and Human Development, where its faculty can more widely share their expertise in teaching struggling undergraduates. The prospective students General College now serves would be either counseled to attend a community college and transfer to the university later, or would be admitted directly into degree-granting programs and offered additional academic support. More success, not less, for those students could well be the result.

Past efforts to save General College have played on a view that the University of Minnesota's first duty to this state is to be open to all comers. That idea must give way to a new reality. 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. It needs to align its subdivisions in a way that makes the most of their assets and brings them recognition as world leaders. That's what this strategic plan proposes, without shutting anyone out of access to a collegiate education. Well-meaning friends of General College should not stand in its way.