Protest shows personal side of U cuts

Terry Collins, Star Tribune
May 17, 2005 UNIV0517

Outside the McNamara Alumni Center at the University of Minnesota on Monday, several protesters stood politely holding cutouts of General College students.

Inside, the mood was equally civil as a capacity crowd heard about 40 people passionately share their views.

This was the public's chance to weigh in on President Robert Bruininks' plan to reshape the university into one of the world's top three research universities. In June, regents will vote on the three main recommendations, which reorganize and cut the number of colleges at the university from 18 to 15.

The plan would create an Honors College to attract top undergraduate students. It would coordinate research and teaching in the sciences and technology, among other things. It would also save as much as $25 million over three or four years.

The focus Monday was the proposed elimination of General College, the entry to the university for a diverse group of underprepared students.

"We need students who can serve as trust bridges between the university and the many communities with
which they identify," said Naomi Scheman, a philosophy and women's studies professor.

"We need students who can challenge us to think differently, and to listen to and learn from those who have been marginalized, silenced or misinterpreted by the academic world," she said.

Armed with more than 3,300 signatures opposing the college's closing, Khong Xiong, president of the General College Student Board, told the regents that without the unit, several first-generation college students like him could not attend the university.

Not so, said Sheila Ards, the university's associate vice president for community partnerships. She said that Bruininks is committed to admitting and retaining students of color, then helping them to graduate.

"This is a bold step and very consistent with the core belief and needs of my community," said Ards, who is black. "In my opinion, there is nothing racist or elitist about striving to be the best or wanting the best education for our children."

Afterward, Bruininks called the forum a great example of democracy. He reiterated that his plan to eliminate the General College will not affect the university's commitment to diversity but rather will help ensure that more students succeed.

He repeated his argument for change, citing that about half of the General College students transfer to degree-granting colleges in two to three years and only about 31 percent graduate in three years.

"We're going to make the university continually accessible, affordable for students with modest needs, but we're going to commit ourselves to great outcomes," he said. "The best education is a strong outcome for our students and that means graduation."

Among the last comments he heard came from graduate student Karen Buhr, who urged the Regents to be thorough.

"Whatever you decide, make sure that your decision does not make the university turn her back on the land grant mission nor the citizens of this state," she said. "Especially the ones that need your protection the most."

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