Rally builds support for General College
By: Lydia Howell
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Many believe low-income and students of color will be ‘tracked’ into community colleges and out of opportunity

“The university has never been just for honor roll and rich kids. Let’s not make it one now,” Lena Gardner, an African American liberal arts senior, stated at the May 13 rally against closing University of Minnesota’s General College. “The U is starting to model corporate structures as an institution. That’s problematic because it’s supposed to be educating people — not making profit.”

University President Robert Bruinink’s stated goal is to expand focus on corporate-funded research, especially new biotech industries, sharply criticized by environmentalists, anti-globalization activists and indigenous tribes. Longtime corporate funders also include the weapons industry. Since the 1960s, undergraduates have raised concerns that for-profit research often trumps their education.

Gardner’s concern represented the 250 students, faculty, community activists, graduates and union-members in a lively speak-out on the MacNamara Alumi Center plaza. With Heart of the Beast Theatre colorful puppets, many gold T-shirts proclaiming “Support General College,” the chant “Nothing ABOUT us, WITHOUT us!” rose up. Students have been refused to meet with them.

The General College Truth Movement (GCTM) has two main demands: no “restructuring” (that is, closing) of GC and the Strategic Positioning process be fully opened to real democratic decision-making. They insist no decisions be made until November, allowing time for broader community input.

Closing GC is being justified, in part, as a result of declining state funding. However, it looks likely that a new Gophers Stadium will be built.
“Now, is not the time to close General College. It’s the time to expand it!” declared Paul Rolfing, of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the country’s fastest growing union. “In a global economy, the most important rungs out of poverty are access to quality education and union jobs with good wages and benefits.”

Closing GC will cut workers.

GC is the main entry point into the UM for students of color, older, low-income and immigrant students, many the first in their families to go to college. Proponents of closing GC claim few GC students graduate: four-year graduation-rate (excluding GC students) is 37 percent; GC students taking six years to graduate are 30.8 percent of the college’s population, compared to a 62.7 percent graduation rate for students across the university.

“GC has a special place in my heart. Working with Upward Bound students at GC, I could see the difference when kids have options and choices for their lives,” said Farheen Hakeem, a Muslim American UM graduate in mathematics. She’s also the Green Party’s candidate for Minneapolis mayor.

A resolution supporting GC before the Minneapolis City Council is sponsored by Councilmembers Natalie Johnson Lee and Dean Zimmerman (both of the Green Party) and Democrats Don Samuels, Gary Schiff, and Sandra Colvin-Roy.

Lester Collins of the Council of Black Minnesotans, quoted early 20th century U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt, saying, “The country won’t be good for any of us to live in if it’s not good for all of us to live in.” Collins added that “It’s critical that General College be maintained and transformed. This is a period of financial and scientific progress, but there’s also social breakdown with extremes of wealth and poverty. Closing GC disrupts balance, fairness, and equity that the university has to make. Another path is needed guided by the right questions, rather than ready answers,” he said.

St. Paul NAACP’s Katie McWatt concurred. “Students in GC should be the ones to decide if they want to be folded into other departments. Would the College of Architecture be told to merge with Design — which includes fashion and art?”

Closing GC is "strongly endorsed" by the UM Alumni Association, representing 52,000 mostly relatively well-off Whites (given Minnesota demographics). VP for Academic Affairs E. Thomas Sullivan told the Pioneer Press that “a new scholarship would be offered to attract diversity,” called the Founders Opportunity Scholarship.

Funds for the scholarship, however, have not been raised.

“GC is very personal,” said Regina Alexander, a returning African American student, calling GC a model to improve education for all students. “Student-teacher relationships are important. You learn a lot better there instead of in huge lecture halls. They say low-income and students of color can just go to junior colleges, but that’s perpetuating a stereotype.”

Sullivan affirms the “two-tier system,” that Alexander rejects. In March, she told the Pioneer Press, “Not all students require or are prepared for the unique...research and teaching mission of UM...if we accept
unprepared or less motivated students...we will fail better qualified students."

Emphasizing "access to excellence," Sullivan and other closing GC supporters appear to use current "code" to justify returning UM to dominance by racial and economic elites, while "tracking" low-income and youth of color into vocational community colleges.

"University of Minnesota began as a land grant university and it shouldn’t be turned into an elitist club!" teaching assistant and GRAD-TRAC union organizer Isac Kamola passionately told the crowd.

The U of M Regents will vote on GC’s future on June 10.

For information about future actions, contact Madeline at 612-991-4158.

Lydia Howell is a Twin Cities journalist and host of Catalyst, Tuesdays at 11 am on KFAI Radio. She welcomes reader responses to lhowell@visi.com.

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