Rally for General College set for today

Mary Jane Smetanka, Star Tribune
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Sometimes Amber Hullom looks around at students in her University of Minnesota classes and realizes hers is the only black face in the room.

At age 21, she has been independent for years and has the moxie to work full time as a personal banker even as she takes a full load of classes. But the insecurities pour out when she talks about leaving the shelter of General College for the bigger university.

"I miss the smaller classes, the one-on-one interaction with professors instead of a TA," she said. "I miss just walking into the office and talking to a real person ... There's not enough time to ask in-depth questions. I don't find classes as diverse. ... In my class on race relations, nobody really talks. I wonder if they're holding back because of me."

General College as it is now would go away if recommendations aimed at making the university a top-three public research university become reality. The future of the college, which enrolls about 1,850 students, has stirred emotional debate about access, diversity and achievement.

That debate will be on full display today at an 11 a.m. rally that will begin on the steps of Appleby Hall and move to Northrop Mall.

How would the university be
affected if General College became a department in the College of Education and Human Development and stopped admitting students within two years? Would it be less diverse and less accessible to underprepared students? Would graduation rates improve?

If the college and its students vanished now, almost one-third of black undergraduates would be gone. Overall minority undergraduate enrollment would drop almost 19 percent. Instead of having more than 16 percent of undergraduates be students of color, just over 14 percent would be minority members.

Those possibilities concern Sam Adegoke, president of the campus' Black Student Union. A soon-to-graduate marketing major who already has a job with General Mills, Adegoke attended parochial and suburban schools.

"A lot of my boys I grew up with didn't have that," he said. "I think that when you eliminate GC, you're eliminating a large population of students."

Amy Samelian, a counselor assistant at St. Paul Harding High School, shares those concerns. Almost one-fourth of Harding's senior class of 400 has been admitted to the Twin Cities campus for next fall.

"You'll never see that again [if General College closes]," she said. Samelian and Adegoke said they wish the university would try to improve General College instead of closing it.

Success vs. access

University President Robert Bruininks said he has no intention of letting diversity lag. Proportionately, people of color are better represented among Twin Cities campus undergraduates than in Minnesota as a whole, he said, and the university wants to keep it that way with scholarships for low-income students. He said the school will continue to admit students who may have academic needs.

"But the underlying message here is that access and opportunity has to be access to success," he said.

General College, with overall six-year graduation rates of about 31 percent (compared with about 57 percent for all undergraduates) and about 20 percent for minority students, doesn't meet that threshold, Bruininks said. "It isn't producing the kind of results we need."

Some students might want to start at one of the many community colleges in the Twin Cities area that didn't exist when General College was founded, he said, and transfer
after a year or two.

But General College Dean David Taylor said that isn't good enough. Many community college students drop out before they ever transfer. National studies show that among students who enter community colleges and intend to transfer to a four-year college, only about 22 percent earn a bachelor's degree within six years. There are no comparable Minnesota statistics.

Taylor also argues that the intangibles of attending a major research university can make a huge difference for students. "It is very elitist to think you can bifurcate the stream of learners into specific institutions," he said. "We know full well that captains of industry and business and government come from selective institutions."

Seeking support

Hullom, who wants to go to law school, says she probably wouldn't be at the university without General College. She is a graduate of Harding, and her college entrance exam scores were "kinda low." She did fine as a General College freshman, pulling mostly A's though her mother developed cancer and moved almost 1,000 miles away, leaving Hullom on her own. A sympathetic General College counselor became "like my second mother," she said, helping her with family problems and talking her out of taking 18 credits per semester.

"She was right," Hullom said. "I had enough stress."

She works 34 hours a week, is engaged to be married, commutes from Blaine and is finding it hard to track down the kind of support she got in General College, though she is aggressive about seeking help. Her grades have fallen to mostly C's, but she is determined to do better to reach her goal of being an attorney.

Without General College, she said, "I think I probably would be in a Southern school with a meager education. ... I might have dropped out."

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