Rally set for General College

Student panel comes out against closing

BY PAUL TOSTO
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The battle over the General College's future at the University of Minnesota is growing increasingly divisive.

University of Minnesota's undergraduate student government Tuesday called on university leadership to keep General College open — even as the student body's outgoing president argued that it be closed as part of an overall plan to remake the university.

Thirty-one top university professors have signed on in support of that plan, which includes closing General College and moving its remaining services to a department in the college of education. Today, General College supporters plan to rally on the Twin Cities campus to keep the college open.

University regents are expected to vote June 10 on the recommendations, which are backed by President Robert Bruininks. General College Dean David Taylor, meanwhile, has taken on his boss over the plan, enlisted some of the college's most prominent supporters.

In a letter earlier this month posted on the General College Web site, Taylor calls the attempt to close General College a "thinly veiled attempt to shift the stream of lower socio-economic class students and color to the Minnesota State Colleges and University system (MnSCU) while 'purchasing' more from higher socio-economic classes with the promise of increased scholarships and perks such College."

The undergraduate student government vote Tuesday is only a recommendation but it did illustrate the division over the issue. The vote was 17-16 with one abstention.

University leaders in late March laid out a package of changes to remake the Twin Cities campus, closing General College and the College of Human Ecology and spreading their remaining programs around the university. The plan, they say, would help the university reach its goal of being one of the world's top three public research universities.

While the plan has many elements that will be embraced, officials knew there would be a battle
College, which for nearly 75 years has kept a door open for students with marginal high school college entrance exam scores, offering an intensive focus on English, writing and math so students can transfer to other colleges.

It's the most racially and ethnically diverse college on campus — home last fall to two-thirds of its black students and 40 percent of the new American Indian and Latino students.

President Robert Bruininks said General College would be "reinvented" as an academic supporter within the College of Education and Human Development to help students across campus. He said the university will not pull back on its commitment to racial or economic diversity on campus even if College is closed.

General College supporters argue that's exactly what will happen.

While General College has some high profile backers, many in the state's business and political community seem willing to support Bruininks, or at least aren't fighting the proposal.

"It's good for us to be courageous and think out of the box once in awhile," said Rep. Bud Nornes, a Rochester Republican who heads the House Higher Education Finance Committee, which plans an initial meeting on the changes May 2.

Nornes called himself generally supportive of the plan that includes closing General College. "That we've been hearing are it's not going to impact students in a negative way. I don't see it as a negative for the teachers. It might result in a streamlining for some of the staff."

Tom Zearley, undergraduate student body president on the Twin Cities campus, backed the university's recommendations Tuesday, including closing General College. The university, he noted, has previously said the university is open to students with all kinds of abilities and support "underprepared" students at colleges.

Zearley noted the university has "made pretty clear they're not cutting back on admissions. The General College faculty and staff. They're not just getting rid of it."

Those who voted to keep General College intact are skeptical of the university's promise that racial and economic diversity will be preserved, he acknowledged. Talking to forum members after the vote the question was "what's the best (decision looking) five, 10 years down the road. … It's kind of exactly.

Members of the student government who voted Tuesday to keep the General College could not comment afterward.

WHAT'S NEXT?

• General College supporters today rally against its closure as part of the university's strategic plan.

• House Higher Education Finance Committee reviews plan on May 2; Regents review plan May 16 and plan to vote June 10.

• The university has posted its recommendations at www.umn.edu; type "U of M Strategic Plan" in the search engine to find them.

• The General College's arguments against closure are posted at www.gen.umn.edu.

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