If University of Minnesota regents have opinions about President Robert Bruininks' proposal to cut three colleges in an effort to make the school one of the top three public research universities in the world, they didn't let on Friday.

After Bruininks formally presented his plan to the board, regents praised the report's general direction but declined to comment on specifics until they hear what the public says at a two-hour hearing Monday at McNamara Alumni Center. Thirty-nine people have signed up to speak.

If the plan is approved, Bruininks' plan would kick off the most sweeping changes at the university since at least the 1960s and would save as much as $25 million over three to four years. 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.

Bruininks suggests spinning off departments in the College of Human Ecology and the College of Natural Resources to other colleges. General College, which does not award degrees but admits underprepared students to the university, would become a department in a larger education college. All three would cease to exist as colleges in July 2006.

Previous attempts to close General College, which opened in 1932, have failed. Bruininks spent much of his time before the regents defending the proposal to close the college, which advocates say will hurt access for minority,
low-income and immigrant students. Bruininks said that won't happen, citing increased recruitment and scholarships, stronger partnerships with urban schools to help students take college-prep classes and improved transfer arrangements with other colleges in the state.

For two years after General College became a department, it would admit students jointly with colleges to ensure that the transition works for students, Bruininks said.

After the meeting, supporters of the college demonstrated outside the building. Lining up in support of General College are a council of black churches, some members of the Minneapolis City Council, and 12 DFL state senators, who sent regents a letter asking that decisions on the change be pushed back. People who support the university's proposals include Twin Cities campus deans (excluding General College), more than 30 prominent professors, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Hubbard Broadcasting's Stanley Hubbard, a General College alumnus who in the past supported keeping the college.

Bruininks' plan includes other proposals, including intensified writing for undergraduates, stronger honors programs, realigned biology and technical programs and a strengthened Academic Health Center. About 20 task forces would work on various issues, reporting back in six months to a year.

While much of the planning has focused on the Twin Cities campus, coordinate campuses also are looking to the future. Bruininks said he is concerned about Crookston and Morris, which face stiff competition and are in regions where high school graduating classes are shrinking.

He said he wanted a "creative look" at the future of those campuses and indicated that closure isn't on the list.

"Closure of campuses suggests abandonment of the university's role in that part of the state," he said. "I'd rather see expanded and thoughtful uses."

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