Students take direct action to save General College

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Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder
Originally posted 5/11/2005

On May 4, General College students and supporters held a sit-in at University of Minnesota President Bruininks’ office in Morrill Hall. Ten students started the peaceful sit-in at 10:15 am; then more students joined the sit-in until the building was under lockdown, which started at noon. Shortly after 6 pm, nine students were arrested by the University of Minnesota Police Department and charged with trespassing.

Gladys McKanzie, chief negotiator of the Clerical and Health Care Union, was informed by email that students would have a sit-in at President Bruininks’ office on the morning of that day. McKanzie said she came to support the students who were fighting to preserve their communities’ educational access and to stand up for their fellow students.

Phyllis Walker, the president of the clerical workers’ union AFSCME Local 3800, said that she was in the building at 1:15 pm. She reported that students were not allowed to use the bathroom and that Kathryn Brown, President Bruininks’ secretary, was “screaming at the students and threatening them.”

Walker said, “Students are fighting for their education, but also are afraid for their education and what Bruininks is going to do to them.” She added that the students inside at the sit-in were brave to go through with a decision like this and to fight for all Minnesotans.

Odessa Cegers, who was in Morrill Hall to support the other protestors until 11 am, said that “General College is a great opportunity for students, and the potential closing will cut off the relationship of the University of Minnesota with many different communities.”
Minnesota Student Association President-elect Emily Serafy Cox thanked the students who were participating in the sit-in. Cox said that she knows how it feels being at a sit-in, and that it can be a scary situation. Cox said that she got her “political entrée” through her sit-in last year.

Cox said that “It is terribly unfortunate” that President Bruininks and his staff made the decision to arrest the students at 6 pm. “All along, the people of the community asked for substantive input in the decision-making, but that was denied by the administration. People of Minnesota have been denied input to not want the U of M to be an elite [institution] like Harvard or Yale,” said Cox.

Aurelius Butler, vice president of the Black Student Union, was present at the demonstration to support those protesting the closing of General College. He said, “There is a constant pattern of the administration to eliminate people out of the decision-making.” Butler added that “Bruininks is thinking about superficial things. The bigger picture is that this institution is to educate our community and not create an elitist and classist institution.”

Joanna O’Connell, a professor at the University of Minnesota, said that she is sorry to see that Bruininks took this pathway. “Students took this step of a sit-in because they did not have any other dialogue,” said O’Connell.

Supporters of General College have set up a website (http://webegc.org/namingth eissue.htm) to inform the public with information such as that “In 2004, GC admitted 65 percent of incoming African American students, 27 percent of Asian Americans, 40 percent of the Chicano/Latino/Hispanic students, and 43 percent of the Native American students,” or to get updates on how people can get involved.

Somali Student Coordinator Muhiyadin Aden said the possible closing of General College is affecting many students of color, but especially Somali students due to the high enrollment of Somali students in General College. Aden also said that the future of many students who go to Minneapolis district schools will be affected.

The St. Cloud State University Student Association wrote in a letter to President Bruininks that “General College of the University of Minnesota serves a great need amongst these students. Therefore, we, the students of St. Cloud State University, can only assume that any attack on the General College at the University of Minnesota is an attack on all of the students of this state. The General College provides access to higher education for all potential students in Minnesota. The erosion of this opportunity comes as an obvious act of brutality against the citizens of the state of Minnesota.”

Many students, faculty members, and other supporters continue their fight to keep General College open and alive. The university’s board of regents is expected to make a decision on the proposal in June.

Ahlam Hassan welcomes reader responses to hass0212@umn.edu.