University of Minnesota regents Friday approved a sweeping reorganization that includes the closing of General College, which for more than 70 years has allowed underprepared students to enter the state's only research university.

By a vote of 11 to 1, regents stood behind President Robert Bruininks' strategy to make the university one of the world's top three public research universities within a decade.

The only regent to oppose the plan was Steven Hunter, a union official who said he had too many unanswered questions to support it. But other regents strongly endorsed the recommendations.

Board Chairman David Metzen acknowledged that "maybe short-term, it's going to be painful," but said, "You can't stand still in this world. Either you're getting better or you're getting worse. This is all about change."

The vote was a triumph for Bruininks, who accomplished what previous university presidents tried and failed to do by persuading regents to support closing General College. But the vote is only the first step in a process that will bring the biggest change the university has seen in decades. Faculty, staff and students now will work in groups for six months to a year to figure out how to carry out priorities that include improving honors programs, reorganizing biology, technology and agriculture programs, increasing undergraduate writing and making professional medical
corrections

After the vote, Bruininks was elated.

"I feel very good," he said. "I'm grateful that they're supporting these bold, long-range recommendations. We think these will improve and transform the University of Minnesota."

Along with General College, the College of Human Ecology and the College of Natural Resources will cease to exist in July 2006, cutting the number of colleges at the university from 18 to 15. Their programs and departments will go to other colleges, including a new College of Design that will wrap in the existing architecture school.

General College, which has about 1,850 students, will become a department in the College of Education and Human Development. To ensure that the transition works smoothly, the college will admit students until 2007, doing so jointly with colleges where students' majors are located.

While some advocates for human ecology and natural resources opposed the loss of those colleges, General College was the only one to mount a campaign to save itself. On Friday, five or six silent protesters stood outside the boardroom, holding signs with messages like, "Eliminate elitism, save GC."

Russell Lyons of Burnsville, who was admitted to General College and transferred into the College of Liberal Arts, was one of the protesters.

"They didn't have to get rid of GC to get this done," he said. Lyons, who is white, said his diverse General College classes exposed him to new worldviews, an experience he described as "incredible." He said he doubted the university's student body could remain as diverse as it is without the college.

Bruininks stressed that maintaining student diversity and access will be top priorities. Regents said they expect progress on both.

The vote means that General College, which has alumni that include Nobel Prize winner Norman Borlaug and TV executive Stanley Hubbard, will stop being an independent college after 74 years. The racially and culturally diverse college got vocal support from alumni, public school counselors and influential minority community leaders who inundated regents with calls, e-mails and letters. But supporters never managed to mount the kind of effective opposition that killed past proposals to get rid of the college.

When the college's longtime dean, David Taylor, announced
three weeks ago that he had accepted a job at Morehouse College in Atlanta, many conceded that the fight was over. But from the start, this process was different from previous attempts to change or get rid of the college.

Bruininks, a 37-year university veteran, said last fall that he would not repeat mistakes he’d seen other presidents make when pushing for big changes. When the discussion started more than 10 months ago, he emphasized the goals rather than the costs of change, stressing the need for better graduation rates, stronger academic programs that are key to the future of both the university and the state, better faculty pay and retention and stronger aid for students. But he also repeatedly said programs could close as a result.

The Citizens League issued a timely report that seemed to send the same message that Bruininks was pushing. Gov. Tim Pawlenty expressed support for the university's plan. Hubbard, one of the college's star alumni and a stalwart supporter of the college, wrote a newspaper opinion piece saying it was time for it to close.

And while some legislators asked that a decision on General College be pushed back, most lawmakers hesitated to interfere with Bruininks' proposals, perhaps because the school took a $185 million cut in funding in the last biennium. University officials said finances were one reason the school could no longer be all things to all people. The plan is expected to save the university as much as $20 million to $25 million over three to four years.

In the University Senate, the vote to support Bruininks' recommendations was a landslide: 120 to 3. Several regents said Friday that knowing an overwhelming majority of the most involved faculty at the university supported the plan helped their decision.

In the end, General College's poor graduation rate probably sealed its fate. Only 31 percent of its students earn an undergraduate degree after six years, compared to 57 percent of undergraduates overall. In a climate where policymakers expect the state's only public research university to show better results, that was unacceptable to Bruininks and most of the regents.

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