Business Forum: The 'U': Changing with the times

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From its origins in 1851 as a one-building preparatory school, the University of Minnesota has developed into one of the top public universities in the country, with five campuses graduating more than 10,000 students every year.

The university did not grow -- in size, scope and accomplishments -- by resting on its laurels. As Minnesota’s only public research institution, the university continually must adapt to maintain its competitiveness in a changing world -- and "changing world" is the operative phrase in the economy of the 21st century, a global economy in which all impediments to international competition are gone, creating a playing field that is "flat," as Tom Friedman says in his new book, "The World Is Flat."

Friedman astutely points out, "It's time to wake up and prepare ourselves for this flat world, because others already are, and there is no time to waste."

In a new report titled "Losing the Competitive Advantage," the American Electronics Association, the nation's largest technology trade association, asserts that the United States is at a crossroads and that the foundation our tech-based economy was built on is eroding rapidly. Higher education, which fuels the innovation that keeps us competitive, has been producing fewer graduates in critical areas.
For example, China now produces four times as many engineers as the United States and the European Union three times as many, and South Korea, with one-sixth the population, graduates nearly the same number. If we are to maintain our standard of living, we must focus and streamline our educational systems quickly.

This is why U of M President Robert Bruininks has recommended and the Board of Regents has endorsed a plan for the university to become one of the top three public research universities in the world. And this is why we need to support Bruininks and the University of Minnesota as they implement the required changes to meet that goal.

Two university task forces recently recommended many of the changes that will help propel the university into the ranks of the top three public research universities within the next decade. The task force proposes changes in the way the university conducts its academic and administrative business. Some colleges, departments, programs and services will look different in the coming months and years if the plan is approved.

We should accept these changes as a starting point and then encourage Bruininks and his team to accelerate the changes needed to support our standing in the global economy.

Process of adaptation

Academic program changes are nothing new; adaptations have included adding, eliminating or reconfiguring programs as new fields of knowledge emerge, society's expectations change and student interests shift. A few examples:

- Between 1950 and the early 1970s, new degree programs were created in computer science, cell biology and Afro-American, American Indian, Chicano and women's studies. Other programs such as interior architecture, milling engineering and metallurgy were discontinued.

- In 1987, the university discontinued its library science degree program because other universities in the region could meet this need. That same year, the Mineral Resources Research Center, where the taconite mining process had been created years earlier, was closed and all mining programs on the Twin Cities campus were eliminated.

- Science and engineering programs were moved into the Institute of Technology in recognition of the growing importance of these fields. The College of Biological Sciences was created, bringing biochemistry, botany and zoology together and producing two new departments: Genetics and Cell Biology and the Department of Ecology.
and Behavioral Biology.

Today the university is focusing on new fields such as nanotechnology, biocatalysis and bioinformatics.

Who knows what the future holds? With technology convergence creating whole new industries, perhaps the university should explore a College of Science and Technology that includes an even broader set of disciplines. More...