What the University can do better

The ongoing work on the proposed plan should be a great opportunity for all of us to re-imagine our work.

By Marvin L. Marshak, Patricia Hampl and David Tilman

As faculty members who served on the University’s Academic Strategic Positioning Task Force, we have been asked about the rationale for our recommendations. We’d like to share a little of that history with you and, more importantly, discuss what the University’s proposed plan for its future holds for all of us.

From the beginning, the task force focused not on the many things the University does well but on the questions of where and what we could do better. Informed by extensive discussions, the task force chose three areas of consideration: student environment, faculty culture and organizational structure. In each of these areas, we tried to highlight for further discussion and consultation ideas about how the University could perform better for our students, our faculty and staff and for all the people of Minnesota.

One area of ongoing concern, for example, is the low percentage of University undergraduate students who graduate. For those of us who have devoted our lives to teaching, education is about successful learning. We believe it is not sufficient to focus on access to the University. We are committed to students graduating from the University. Students who graduate learn more, earn more and are better equipped to achieve their personal goals.

We believe the University must do more to nourish success and graduation for all students and especially for students of underrepresented groups. That is, in part, why the task force recommended realigning General College. All people, and especially traditional-age college students, respond to the expectations of the people around them. Mainstreaming with support has been the trend in American education since the 1954 Supreme Court decision that separate is inherently unequal. By separating students with less strong high school records from the
majority of the student body, the structure of General College undercuts the efforts of the dedicated faculty and staff who teach there. Every other Big Ten university graduates all students and minority students at a higher percentage rate than the University. No other Big Ten university sorts perceived “weaker” students into a separate collegiate unit. Becoming a top three public university means excellence everywhere, including access, diversity and success for all of our students.

We hope that the discussion of the proposed plan will go beyond focusing on one or two recommendations. The opportunities for improving student writing, facilitating interdisciplinary studies in an honors college, consolidating the University’s strengths in the basic and applied biological and physical sciences, strengthening the ability of faculty to teach, do research and provide service, as well as other recommendations, deserve substantial discussion and consideration. Knowledge is constantly changing. The University must change as well if we are to fulfill our responsibilities to all of the people of Minnesota and the world.

The ongoing work on the proposed plan should be a great opportunity for all of us, including our General College colleagues, to re-imagine our work. We need to help a student body, which is diverse across the entire campus, to achieve a higher level of success than in the past. We need to form new relationships with faculty colleagues who were formerly dispersed to become more effective in research and creative activity. We need to more efficiently deploy clearly limited resources to achieve what is really important for our University community and for the people of Minnesota and the world. We hope that many members of our community will agree to serve on the forthcoming task forces, so that we can sustain and build the University’s momentum for progress that has been started by the work of the past nine months.

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