



April 7, 1989

Dear (Legislator):

On behalf of the League, I am writing to emphasize our concern about both the money and the message that the Legislature sends to the University of Minnesota this year.

We are convinced that the Legislature should make a more substantial investment in the University's quality improvement effort, while requiring the University to resolve the difficult decisions about reducing program scope and lowering enrollment. The money and the message are inseparable; neither moves without the other.

We are not suggesting a specific funding level. But a budget that just keeps up with inflation is completely inadequate, considering what we are expecting the University to do.

We recognize that there are great pressures for funding, even within the education sector. But we are making a tragic mistake if, in our enthusiasm for supporting K-12 education, the community colleges, state universities, and technical institutes, we miss the long-term strategic importance of the University of Minnesota. The "U" has long been underfunded relative to other public universities of its type; it is certainly underfunded compared with our expectations for its contribution to Minnesota's future.

Much of our past success as a state is traceable to the University's extraordinary contributions in teaching and research. That tradition is in trouble. Even with a highly successful private fundraising campaign, there remains so much fiscal pressure that we are in increasing danger of losing the people who can rebuild and sustain excellence. Our failure to get serious about this comes at exactly the time that many other public universities, armed with substantial new resources from their states, are recruiting faculty members we most need to retain.

We recognize that the "U" doesn't show up on the political landscape in everyone's district, in the way that public schools and roads do. However, what the whole legislative body does with this decision is conceivably the most important strategic decision to be made for many years to come. Given the way the economy is changing, the success of this institution may affect Minnesota's economic future even more than it did in the past.

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We strongly urge that you make an appropriation that signals strong support to the new administration. We thought the bargain struck was: lower enrollment, fewer programs, higher quality from the "U"; and increased financial support from the state. Both sides to the bargain should be kept.

We hope that legislative intent is clear that the University should get on with the objective of reducing the scope of its programs -- concentrating on what it does best -- and take the necessary steps to ensure that the students admitted to its programs have completed the appropriate preparation requirements. Progress on reducing programs has certainly begun, but hasn't gone far. Enrollment is trending downward, but pushed there mostly by demographic changes. Many believe that movement on both fronts is stalled because it isn't clear that these changes have actual legislative support.

1989 is the right year to recapture the momentum for change at the University and to move up the level of state funding.

Sincerely,

Peter Vanderpoel  
President