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University of Minnesota
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Dear Members of the Board of Regents:

We are writing to express the Citizens League's support for a University inquiry into alternative ways to better promote access and academic success of students of color and low-income students.

In particular, we support the proposal that the University:

- work in partnership with MNSCU to develop a plan for meeting the remedial needs of post-secondary students;
- increase the retention of qualified but at-risk students at the University by developing appropriate supportive services through academic and student-support departments;
- improve the current partnerships already in place between the K-12 systems and the University, aimed at helping prepare minority students for post-secondary education; and
- examine the future role—if any—of General College in meeting the goal of access.

The Citizens League has a long-standing interest in Minnesota's post-secondary education system. Our support for the University administration proposal is based on studies we conducted in 1986, 1993 and 1995. These study reports—which were produced by committees of interested Twin Cities citizens—have concentrated on two main concerns: access and focus. Both are relevant to the current debate.

Access

We believe that Minnesota can and should do a better job of ensuring access to post-secondary education, including the University, by low-income people and people of color. And the state can and should do a better job of supporting the successful completion of post-secondary degree programs by minority students.

People of color, who are disproportionately poor and low-income, face significant financial barriers to attending post-secondary education. Minnesota should ensure that financial need does not prevent a well-prepared student from attending post-secondary education or prevent the most talented applicants from attending the University of Minnesota.

Visit the League's Web site at <http://freenet.msp.mn.us/ip/pol/citizen>

The Citizens League promotes the public interest in Minnesota by involving citizens in identifying and framing critical public policy choices, forging recommendations and advocating their adoption.

Once enrolled, Minnesota's post-secondary students of color are more likely to drop out for a wide variety of reasons, including financial reasons. That record must be improved, including at the University of Minnesota.

However, the University's own data show that enrollment in General College is not a proxy either for low income or minority race. Only 18 percent of the students in General College are under-represented minorities. Only 20 percent are from the central cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. And while General College students are slightly more likely to qualify for financial aid than Twin Cities campus undergraduates in general, 43 percent do *not* demonstrate financial need as defined by the federal needs analysis.

In other words, the majority of General College students are white suburban students who are simply underprepared for college. This record suggests that GC should not be considered the avenue for improving access to the University either for students of color or low-income students.

The University's data also show that GC is not the path to improving minority students' success at obtaining degrees. Even though General College costs twice as much per student as CLA, only 7 percent of minority GC students graduate from the University within eight years, compared with 25 percent for CLA students.

The State of Minnesota—and the University, by extension—can expect long-term budget and enrollment pressures. Population growth implies increased spending just to keep per-student investment static. Budget pressures in the institutions imply continued, or worsening, pressure to raise tuitions.

These population trends and the systems' poor performance with students of color and low-income students pose a human capital disaster for the state, aside from raising other important issues of equity and justice.

Under these circumstances, it is inefficient and inequitable for the state to provide large amounts of resources to underprepared middle-class students to attend the University of Minnesota, while failing to remove the financial and social barriers to post-secondary education faced by qualified poor and minority students. That is what the current policies do.

The University of Minnesota, along with MNSCU, the K-12 school districts and the Legislature itself, must begin to seriously sort through alternative strategies that *would* meet the goal of access. That investigation should not focus only on General College. Rather, it should (as the administration recommends) include a broad range of strategies in high schools, community and technical colleges, University academic departments and the community. We also urge the University and Legislature to look at how the system of financing higher education could better target education appropriations to needy students.

Focus

Our current study, which is exploring what the public sector should do to promote prosperity in the region, has found that the presence of a top-quality research university plays a critical role in a metropolitan area's economic

vitality. The University of Minnesota has played this role in the past. If it is to continue to do so, **the University must concentrate on its business as the flagship institution for graduate education and research in Minnesota.**

We believe that the functions performed by General College do not belong in the University and should be distributed elsewhere. Remedial training for students with poor reading and math skills needs to be—and *should* be—provided somewhere if these students are to succeed in post-secondary education.

But remedial programs should be handled by community colleges, as the University's administration has recommended. Such education is not appropriate to an institution that is focusing on increasing its preparation requirements, attracting top-notch students and faculty, and attaining a rank among the best research universities in the country.

High school graduates who might have enrolled in the General College because they did not qualify for admission to other colleges of the University should attend community colleges or state universities and perhaps later transfer to the University. The important work of providing remedial instruction to talented students who have not completed preparation requirements because of special circumstances should be accomplished by the University's academic departments.

Conclusion

The administration's proposal is a controversial one. We hope the Board of Regents will not shy away from the controversy.

We urge the Regents to initiate a process to develop appropriate and effective strategies for improving access and success for minority students. The possibility of transferring General College functions elsewhere should be considered among the alternatives. We would support such a decision. The final decision about the fate of General College should be made within the context of a complete strategy.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important matter. If you have questions about the Citizens League's position, please contact me at (612) 338-0791.

Sincerely,

Lyle D. Wray, Ph.D.
Executive Director

cc: Nils Hasselmo, Ettore Infante, Phillips Shively
Star Tribune, St. Paul Pioneer Press, Minnesota Daily

References: *Commitment to Focus: More of Both*, 1986; *Minnesota's Budget Problem: A Crisis of Quality, Cost and Fairness*, 1993; *Choose Reform, Not Declining Quality*, 1995.