

CITIZENS LEAGUE
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STATEMENT TO UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA REGENTS

We strongly urge the regents to reaffirm support of the process by which the university is seeking to become a stronger institution. At the mid-summer meeting, the regents will likely make their first response to the Plan for Focus task force report. That response should do two things:

Make clear that the task force report is not the last word, that no department or college of the university will be phased out without the most careful and complete review; and

Reinforce support for the planning process itself, refusing to compromise it by preemptory intervention.

There should be no question about the regents' authority to approve the ultimate strategy for refocusing the university mission and reallocating its resources. Having that authority means not having to act prematurely.

The Commitment-to-Focus strategy, initiated by President Keller a couple of years ago, is now entering its most difficult stage; its principles, already adopted by the regents, now must translate to difficult choices. It is simply not possible to maintain the university's breadth of programming and have any reasonable hope of distinctive quality.

The university administration has already acknowledged that. And now a university-wide task force, after three months of deliberation, has shown the courage to make a specific proposal for reallocation and reorganization of the Twin Cities campus.

Consider how remarkable this is: a representative group inside the university has said, on the record, that quality has declined and that hard choices must be made if the university is to be restored to the distinction of being among the very best public universities. Think of what the task force might have said, but didn't:

They might have said that the university should keep all its present programs, maximizing access and breadth even if quality has suffered some -- but they didn't;

They might have said that agreement just isn't possible on which parts of the university are less central to its mission, so the president and the regents will have to decide by themselves what to do -- but they didn't;

They might have said that there are several alternatives for resolving the issue....here they are and we don't know which to choose -- but they didn't;

They might have said that here are the divisions with lower priority, but we're not disclosing their names, just assigning them coded letters so as to avoid unnecessary anxiety -- but they didn't.

Instead, the task force was straightforward. It put its best proposal forward. That proposal now faces a few months of review. It will undoubtedly change before it is approved. This review period is a difficult time for the many programs suggested for change or phase-out. But the discussion now going on, both inside the university and all around the state, is a healthy debate about an important public issue. It may be uncomfortable for those directly involved, but the alternatives to the present process are worse. What matters most at this July regents' meeting is that the report gets the respect it deserves.

Understandably, people who are adversely affected by the proposal want the regents to make early assurances to protect their programs. The regents have an obligation to resist that approach; to exempt any part of the university from the review process would cripple the integrity of the whole effort. Having set any precedent for protecting certain programs, how could the regents resist protecting the rest? Or would the mission be reshaped around those programs with the most powerful political constituencies?

We believe that there is strong public support for regents' action that keeps the big picture in focus. It's natural for others to think first of their own department or college. But the university is going to become a better place only if enough people start thinking about it as a whole, not just in part. That's the picture the legislature had in approving the Commitment-to-Focus approach and making future special funding contingent on reducing programs and restricting enrollment to better-prepared students.

The regents should assure everyone in Minnesota that nothing in this task force report will become policy until all the facts are in, and everyone who cares to speak about the issues has been heard. But it should make equally clear its commitment to the process and to keeping the bigger picture in focus.