

Time for a New Strategy at the University of Minnesota?

Or, More Humility and Less Arrogance?

The following letter was supplied to me by Mr. Michael McNabb with permission to post. I have not modified the original except for including a correction from the author. Departure from plain typography - emphasis - is mine.

July 12, 2008

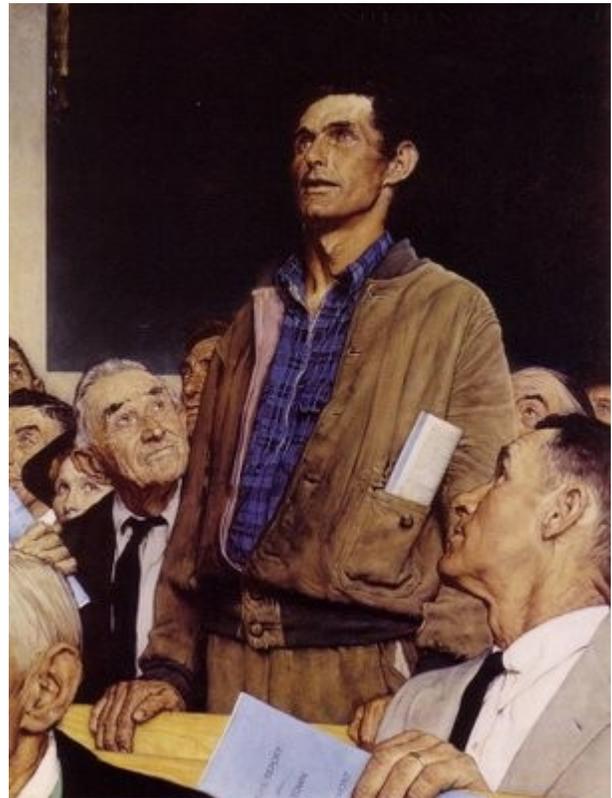
President Robert H. Bruininks
University of Minnesota
202 Morrill Hall
100 Church Street S.E.
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

Dear President Bruininks:

Thank you for taking the time to read and to respond to my correspondence of May 14, 2008. I know from personal experience at the legislature with civil law legislation that the final version of a bill may not contain all the provisions that were included in the original proposal. So, it is always necessary to evaluate the results of the legislative strategy.

The 2008 Capital Request that the University presented to the legislature called for \$225 million in state bonds for academic facilities (in addition to the separate proposals for \$233 million for new biomedical facilities, \$26 million for the Folwell Hall renovation, and \$24 million for a new Bell Museum). If the original goal of \$225 million represents an "A" grade, what grade does one assign to the final result of \$131 million? **The "cornerstone" of the Capital Request was \$100 million in HEAPR bonds for the renovation and maintenance of existing academic facilities. What grade does one assign to the final result of \$35 million?**

[Authors correction: There is an error in the second paragraph. The Capital Request for \$225 million did include the \$26 million for Folwell Hall and the \$24 million for a new Bell Museum.]



Two years ago the legislature slashed the HEAPR request from \$80 million to \$30 million. The cumulative effect of the failure to secure sufficient HEAPR bonds in the last two bonding sessions is clearly visible on campus. The academic infrastructure is beginning to crumble around us.

The response of the University administration was to develop and to present to the Regents an unconscionable scheme to impose a capital fee on the students, the segment of the University community that has the fewest resources. This proposal follows the staggering increases in tuition that the University has imposed on the students over the past several years to enable it to pay the bills for its operating expenses.

It will not be productive for the University to increase the financial pressures on its students (and their parents). The University needs their support to develop a successful legislative strategy.

A different attitude must accompany a new approach to the legislature. Several years ago a former state senator, who was a leader in his caucus, used the word "arrogant" to describe to me the attitude of the University administration. That remark surprised me. However, the chair of the House Capital Investment Committee recently used the same word in public remarks about the University. **We have a problem here.** It is more difficult to successfully execute a legislative strategy when the chair of the committee that must approve University bonding bills has the perception that the University is dismissive of the legislature.

There is a simple way to change that continuing perception of the University at the legislature. A senior University administrator should visit each representative and state senator in person and ask that legislator what the University should do to improve its performance at the legislature.

As we develop a new legislative strategy, we also need to examine our objectives for the University. A goal of becoming one of the top three public research institutions in the world is illusory as there is no recognized authority to certify that such a goal has been attained. **Such talk diverts attention from the real challenges facing the University that are the consequences of the failure to secure the support of the legislature.**

There is also a danger of placing too much emphasis on research. A disproportionate allocation of resources to research would have an adverse effect on the equally important task of teaching our children.

In the latest U.S. News & World Report survey (widely used despite its flaws), the national rankings of the graduate schools at the University are as follows (private and public institutions/public

institutions only):

Biological sciences 34/17

Chemistry 22/12

Engineering 24/12

Research medical schools 36/18

Physics 23/14

Business 27/13

Earth sciences 21/12

Mathematics 17/7

Law 22/8

Computer science 31/18

While we should certainly strive for excellence, our goals should also be realistic and subject to objective measurement as much as possible. We need to develop an effective strategy to enlist the support of the governor, the legislature, the students and their parents to achieve those goals.

Sincerely yours,

Michael W. McNabb

**University of Minnesota B.A. 1971; J.D. 1974 University of Minnesota Alumni Association
lifetime member**

cc: Board of Regents