

Becoming a University of Promise

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The development of our youth has always been a fundamental obligation of adults and our public institutions. Today, fulfilling this important—indeed essential—obligation of ensuring healthy development of children and youth in society represents a special challenge and commitment. Our future requires highly educated citizens who participate fully in the economic and social life of our communities. Educational achievement and productivity are essential to individual, economic, and civic well-being. We must renew

our commitment to address the needs and preparation of children, youth, and the families that support them.

The Importance of Leadership: University of Promise and the Land-grant Mission

The University of Minnesota is proud to be a University of Promise and to participate in the America's Promise nationwide campaign to strengthen our commitment to the success of children. As a University of Promise and a land-

Photo by Don Breneman



The author, second from the left, and others mark the University of Minnesota becoming a University of Promise.

grant institution, we are well positioned to contribute to this critical effort.

This commitment is particularly meaningful as we celebrate our 150th anniversary. The University has a rich history of outreach and service that is fundamental both to our heritage and to our obligations as a land-grant institution. Eighty years ago, University of Minnesota president Lotus Coffman described a land-grant university that embraced its service mission. The University, Coffman said, “should be imbued with an impelling desire to search for and discover truth . . . and saturated with human purposes and common human feelings.” Moreover, the University as a whole, he said, “breathes the spirit of the social order . . . is constantly engaged in an attempt to understand the meaning of the age . . . inculcates the craft spirit of the profession . . . dominated by a spirit of helpfulness.” As a University of Promise, we have an opportunity to put into action these inspiring words.

We believe our efforts will contribute to a critical community need as well as to our own institutional goals and strategic focus. Being a University of Promise is an opportunity to more deeply express our mission as a public, land-grant, urban, research University. Our mission is guided by a key principle: In the 21st century, information and continuous learning will be fundamental to individual careers, economic development, and quality of life. Our “promise work” will strengthen our focus and help us organize and integrate our resources to work with youth today as well as help improve their future as productive citizens tomorrow.

The University of Minnesota is, moreover, part of a nationwide effort to reaffirm higher education’s role in solving society’s problems. This initiative has been supported by the Kellogg Foundation and coordinated by the National Association of University and Landgrant Colleges; its final report speaks

powerfully of our obligation and history of engagement:

“The essential distinction of public research universities has been to serve as the engines of discovery that have helped the people of the United States deal with the intractable problems before them.... This is a distinguished record on which to stand. In many ways, the utilitarian aspects of our programs have been our greatest glory. But our work is not complete.” (Kellogg Commission, 2000)

These values color the University of Minnesota’s vision of its outreach mission and can be applied specifically to its “promise work.” But it’s not enough to understand the need and state values and goals. To succeed, we must act strategically and with purpose. Our challenge is to align resources in research, learning, and outreach with the needs of communities.

Organizing Our Resources

We will add the most value as a University of Promise by developing a strategy that advances our mission and embodies our accountability to Minnesota citizens. This effort is, after all, fundamentally about realizing the University’s promise to Minnesota’s children and youth. The four principle strategies driving the University of Minnesota’s commitment follow here with illustrative priorities and activities.

Our challenge is to align resources in research, learning, and outreach with the needs of communities.

1. Strengthen and coordinate leadership across the many departments, colleges, and academic units. Three well-established and respected units were asked to provide joint direction: The

Center for 4-H Youth Development; the Children, Youth, & Family Consortium; and the Center for Adolescent Health.

- The Center for 4-H Youth Development provides direct expertise and leadership for youth development research, policy, and best practices primarily through its connection to the University of Minnesota Extension Service offices in all 87 Minnesota counties. It also works with public, private, and nonprofit youth organizations in the urban communities where it is located on the Minneapolis Campus.
- The Children, Youth, & Family Consortium provides a central focus for the dissemination of research-based information, development of policy recommendations, and the sharing of resources across our campus. The Consortium provides an interdisciplinary framework and staff to link the resources of the University of Minnesota to the needs of children, youth, and families in Minnesota and on a national scale.
- Co-housed with these two units, the Center for Adolescent Health is a division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health of the Medical School and includes a network of programs addressing youth health and well-being. It is providing leadership for the University of Promise's strategies that revolve around healthier outcomes for youth and risk and resiliency research on adolescents and their family and communities.

With the guidance of these three units, dozens of our academic units and centers are being engaged: The University of Minnesota Extension Service, the College of Education & Human Development, the College of Human Ecology, Multicultural & Academic Affairs, the

Career & Community Learning Center, and many more. These coordinated efforts provide a high level of cross-cutting leadership to link resources and activities across academic and service units. A second leadership group is directly addressing the needs of low income youth in the metropolitan areas surrounding the University of Minnesota campuses. Guided by the University's Metropolitan Higher Education Workplan, it supports the preparation and enrollment of students seeking to enter and successfully complete higher education programs (beginning with pre-K–12 students who are educationally at risk). The Workplan relies on the University's collaboration with education partners in pre-K–12 and postsecondary institutions, and seeks to improve student achievement and assist students and families on preparation for postsecondary education—especially those families that have had little experience with higher education. At the University, this pre-K–12 effort embraces the America Reads literacy initiative. In addition to providing hundreds of reading tutors to school and community sites all over the metropolitan area, it supports a wide range of civic and social enrichment programs like ScienceCentrum, Bioneers, Physics Force, and the Jane Addams School for Democracy.

2. Build deeper understanding by connecting research and learning. This publication is dedicated to just this purpose but represents only a fraction of what is being done. At last count, the University had well over 300 projects focused on children's needs. Our College of Education & Human Development conducts research, collaborates on school-based research, and provides a clearinghouse on key issues. Faculty and University students in several colleges are engaged in early intervention reading programs in urban schools that pave the way for competent readers, a most critical requirement for success-

Photo by Timothy Hursley



The Center for 4-H Youth Development, the Children, Youth & Family Consortium, and the Center for Adolescent Health are all located in the McNamara Alumni Center. Their faculty and staff provide direction and leadership for University of Promise strategies.

ful students. Our colleges recruit teachers and other professionals to build leadership and greater diversity in the schools and other human development agencies through programs like the Multicultural Teacher Development Program, the Common Ground Consortium with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the Home-Grown Teacher Partnership Program. Each of these contributes to the development of personnel who face special challenges of working in urban schools and related agencies.

3. Promote public education and teaching about what youth need to succeed. In addition to special publications, public lectures, and other public events, we encourage greater opportunities for practitioners to collaborate with University faculty, researchers, and students on projects of mutual interest. The College of Education & Human Development is developing a comprehensive action plan to support the development of reading skills in children across the state who

are at risk for reading failure. It will include creating a rich source of research-based information and resources for parents and teachers to get information about best practices, and expansion of the University's already extensive reading tutor program statewide. The University-Community Early Literacy Initiative created a "Power Read" poster, in collaboration with public libraries and the University's Women's Athletics Department and conducted a book drive, "Goldy Meets the Cat in the Hat," in collaboration with Barnes & Noble. Also under way is a major new focus on positive out-of-school time led by the University of Minnesota Extension Service in cooperation with the College of Human Ecology.

4. Develop partnerships that model and produce better outcomes for Minnesota's youth. Strong community partnerships make it possible for the University of Minnesota to serve hundreds of thousands of children and youth throughout Minnesota each year. The Center for 4-H Youth

Development supports 4-H Youth Development Programs in every Minnesota county. The Adolescent Health Program and the Konopka Institute work with community-based practitioners on issues of service, evaluation, and best practices that directly impact programs that involve young people. Partnerships with schools make it possible for collaborative programs to focus on achievement of urban and low-income youth. These include Check and Connect to increase school retention, and the El Puente Mentor Program designed for year-round experiences for at-risk students. The new Urban After-School Initiative in partnership with the City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Public Schools, and the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board will advance and coordinate youth development programs, enhance local volunteer recruitment and retention, and

strengthen institutions that provide programs in local neighborhoods and communities. The University will serve as a resource and partner to the Volunteer Resource Center and Twin Cities' Promise as a web-based Promise Station is developed to connect community volunteers and mentors to youth programs and agencies.

Programs like these show how the University helps the public understand what is needed to improve outcomes for youth. By and large, we are not a direct service delivery organization. We conduct research, work with others to apply research findings both in the community and schools and to develop progressive public policies, and use educational and other interventions to improve performance of agencies and outcomes for youth. At the center of these efforts are deep partnerships with organizations in Minnesota communities, principally



the Minnesota Alliance with Youth, Minneapolis Promise for Youth, and the Association of Minnesota Counties. For the University to connect its knowledge and resources to community needs, communication and partnerships among University researchers, professionals, and citizens in the community are necessary.

Running to Catch the Future

The University of Minnesota Promise initiative connects our historical values and resources to the growing challenges confronting our nation's youth. It addresses the five commitments of America's Promise through the strategic alignment and commitment of University leadership and resources in partnership with organizations in Minnesota communities. And above all, it moves beyond projects to create more systemic and productive partnerships with families and other resources to improve outcomes for children and youth.

One of my favorite expressions is that "you must run to catch the future." It is evident that we must act with greater urgency, diligence, and creativity on behalf of (and in conjunction with) our children and youth, for a society that fails to invest sufficiently in its children is in great jeopardy of risking its future.

Bibliography

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All educators and citizens have a responsibility to improve lives and education for our citizens from their early years of life well into adulthood. The 21st century will be an era of synergy and partnerships, connecting what we each do best for the collective benefit of society. We must respond together to the strong national voices calling on us to improve the lives and future prospects of our youth. In becoming a University of Promise, the University is honored to play a role in this great crusade on behalf of young people in Minnesota and across America.

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