The Hennepin-University Partnership (HUP) was created in 2005 to catalyze and strengthen collaborations between Hennepin County and the University of Minnesota. In the past, HUP has hosted an annual symposium showcasing successful collaborations. However, this year’s symposium focused on community engagement, a topic of interest to both Hennepin County and the University.

On March 9, 2012, HUP hosted a Forum on Community Engagement at the McNamara Alumni Center on the University of Minnesota’s Minneapolis campus. The event served as an opportunity for Hennepin County and the University to hear provocative speakers and to participate in an open discussion about why we engage communities, what we hope to accomplish through community engagement, and how to measure the effectiveness of our efforts. Participants at the event included approximately 60 Hennepin County staff and 50 University faculty and staff from many different departments.

The half-day event began with opening comments from Jan Callison, 6th District Commissioner for Hennepin County, and Ed Goetz, CURA director. Speakers included Kathy Quick, assistant professor for public and nonprofit leadership, on the spectrum of community engagement; Steve Kelley, director of the Center for Science, Technology, and Public Policy, on communicating complex ideas; Tai Mendenhall, associate director of the Citizen Professional Center, on cogeneration in community health practice; and Jay Clark, director of the Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO), on community organizing. The event was designed to be interactive and draw upon the knowledge and experience of participants. Each table had a trained facilitator (many trained in the art of hosting) who led three table discussions to expand understanding of the concepts presented by the speakers and to exchange thoughts and experiences around community engagement.

Following the presentations, Laura Bloomberg, director of the Center for Integrative Leadership, moderated a Leadership Conversation Circle with support from Gina Baas, assistant director of the Center for Transportation Studies. The Leadership Conversation Circle was designed to provide an opportunity for participants to hear from Hennepin County and University of Minnesota leaders about how community engagement is approached from an organizational level. The conversation began with Richard Johnson, Hennepin County Administrator; Peter McLaughlin, 4th District Commissioner for Hennepin County; Mark Stenglein, 2nd District Commissioner for Hennepin County; Tom Fisher, dean of the College of Design; and Heidi Barajas, director of the Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center, responding to the question of why community engagement is important. All participants were then invited to participate in the conversation.

Evaluation findings showed that 90% of attendees said they gained new insights about community engagement based on what they heard at the event, and 84% of attendees would consider changes in their approach to community engagement going forward. Many follow-up items have been suggested to continue the dialogue and continue to share best practices.

For more information about the Hennepin–University Partnership and the Forum on Community Engagement, visit www1.umn.edu/hup/index.html.