It only takes one voice to make a change, and students who take part in a new initiative at the University of Minnesota are getting the opportunity to find that voice within themselves. The Community Development Work Study Program (CDWSP), a national effort of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), provides financial support to educational institutions to recruit and support economically disadvantaged students of color committed to community development. Students accepted into the program are provided tuition and internships in planning and community development. Through the program, a new generation of community planners, policy analysts, and specialists will become trained to solve some of the most pressing issues facing our inner cities.

Beginning in 2004, CURA partnered with the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs to bring CDWSP fellows to the University. Fellows pursue a graduate degree in urban and regional planning or public policy. During their degree program, they also gain practical experience through an internship with a community development agency. The program is jointly funded through CURA, the Humphrey Institute, HUD Community Work Study grants, and the organizations in which fellows are placed.

The critical need for rising stars in planning and community development—especially those from communities of color—was outlined in a recent report sponsored by the Ford Foundation titled *University Education for Community Change*. Researcher Andrew Mott found that “there is a severe shortage of people who are fully prepared for key positions in the field [of community-based development],” and that “the shortage is especially great among people of color.” The CDWSP has potential to provide a significant step toward meeting that need.

Five students have been accepted as CDWSP fellows for 2005–2006. Each fellow has been placed in an internship...
that allows them to practice their skills and learn what their degree will allow them to do in their own communities. The local agencies where these fellows have been placed range from local community development corporations and housing resource centers to a mortgage foreclosure prevention agency and a city housing department. Fellows also participate in a seminar that helps them integrate their practical experience with classroom education and learn about each other’s experiences.

Community development staff members who have hosted the CDWSP fellows are impressed by the students’ enthusiasm and eagerness to understand the issues and challenges of community development. Marcia Cartwright, a real estate director with HOPE Community, takes great pleasure in seeing young students work at her organization and take interest in community development. “I want to know there will be someone willing to carry on this work when I am gone, who has the same passion for the community, and also new skills,” said Cartwright.

The internships the CDWSP provides mold students’ learning experience, shape their practical skills, and—according to the students themselves—allow them to achieve goals beyond their reach. In addition, each fellow brings his or her own life experiences and sense of commitment to the program.

Tibesso Dayassa escaped from the war-torn region of Oromia in Ethiopia with his family in the early 1990s and relocated to Minnesota. After earning his degree in planning, he hopes to help his family and members of his community live a better life in the Twin Cities. Currently, he is working with Seward Redesign, a nonprofit community development corporation in Minneapolis, where he is helping with outreach to the East African community. Dayassa admits that it is “much harder to create change in the community than reading about it might suggest.” However, by talking with local residents and understanding their needs, he has been able to identify for local development and planning officials what resources are most needed in the area.

Acocoa Lee, another CDWSP fellow, is studying public policy and has enjoyed the responsibility she has been given at her job at HOPE Community, a Minneapolis-based community outreach center, and is particularly proud of the contributions she has made to the organization. Lee notes that she has gained a great deal of insight into economic and community development through her participation in the CDWSP. “My internships have afforded me the opportunity to work and form relationships with organizations and people that have motivated my work and participation in class,” Lee said. “I now feel like I have practical experience to make me an asset in both the workforce and my class discussions. This experience has shaped the way I view possible solutions to the economic inequities that spurred my interest in public policy.”

Makeheda Zulu-Gillespie, community organizer at Northside Residents Redevelopment Council (NRRC), was thrilled to work with Shalaunda Holmes, a planning student who is in her final semester and her third placement through the CDWSP. “Shalaunda helped us to reflect on how we approach our work,” said Zulu-Gillespie. “She helped bridge our internal communication through her work with staff involved in different program areas. Her planning perspective contributed to the success of several projects.”

Holmes has taken on several opportunities like the one at NRRC, some of which may not have been available to her without the fellowship program. “I have gained a lot of valuable experience. I wrote a grant, filed a rezoning application, and was involved in project management,” said Holmes. “I am using my experience on the cultural transitions public art project for my professional paper required for my planning degree.”

Paul Singh, a first year planning student working with the Greater Frogtown Community Development Corporation (CDC), is also participating in the program. His planning skills and abilities in geographic information systems (GIS) analysis have given the organization ideas and opportunities that were not available before. “They have appreciated my GIS skills, but it has not yet been fully integrated into the CDC’s day-to-day work,” said Singh. “I hope this semester that will happen.” His experience has shown how much of an impact University of Minnesota students can make in surrounding communities when a business or community organization is willing to engage in such partnerships.

Terra Cole, a second-year planning student who has been working with Greater Metropolitan Housing Corporation, explained that her CDWSP fellowship will give her skills that she can bring back to her own community. “I have learned a lot about the complexities of communicating between residents and organizations. It is challenging to explain to residents the resources available to help them with their housing issues,” said Cole. “It has been invaluable to learn about the complexity of funding affordable housing. I am looking forward to learning more about development funding in my work on housing redevelopment in the Hawthorne Neighborhood. This will be particularly exciting since this is the neighborhood where I live.”

Not only do the fellows contribute to the communities they work in, they also bring new energy to the classroom. David Hollister, a University of Minnesota faculty member, has worked with several of the CDWSP fellows through his course on neighborhood revitalization. “Having some of the CDWSP fellows in my class has definitely enriched the discussion, as they are able to bring both personal and work experiences into the class,” said Hollister. “Their sophisticated understanding of public and nonprofit housing programs made a substantial contribution. It is particularly important for a class such as neighborhood revitalization to have perspectives from students who come from a wide variety of experience.”

For more information about the Community Development Work Study Program, visit the HUD website at www.hud.gov/progdesc/cdwsp.cfm.

Kris Nelson is program director for CURA’s Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) program, and placement coordinator for the Community Development Work Study Program. Jamie Proulx is assistant director of communications in the Office of Communications at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.