You’ve directed a highly visible and successful research and engagement center at the University of Minnesota for 30 years. What do you say at the time of your retirement? If you’re Tom Scott, a low-key political scientist who has just stepped down as director of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, you say with a smile, “I didn’t expect to do it for so long.” When asked to list the highs and lows over his 30 years of leadership at CURA, he continues in that low-key vein. “Not any huge peaks and valleys. To me, the important thing is what the University is doing and what CURA is doing to support that. I like the land-grant mission—good teaching, good research, and connecting those two activities through work with the community. Every time we can accomplish something in that broader context, we’ve done well.”

In some ways, the mere survival of CURA is a feather in Scott’s cap. It has remained viable and well-respected through sometimes tempestuous politics both within and outside the University, as well as survived occasional bouts of indifference to urban issues that might have done in a center with less gravitas. Other similar centers have been established across the United States, and almost all, like CURA, were founded during the years of urban unrest in the 1960s when universities were called upon to help bring the vision of civil rights into reality. Over time, almost all of these centers have disappeared, sometimes through lack of funding, both local and federal, or by being incorporated into other university units, often design schools or urban planning units. CURA has followed the opposite path under Scott’s leadership. Innovative initiatives have bloomed within CURA and then been adopted by external organizations or other University units where they could be sustained. “We hosted early biomass research and geographic information systems work,” Scott says. “We did a video on agricultural pollution in southeast Minnesota and an environmental course catalog. We were pioneers on some of these issues and now the University has an entire Institute on the Environment.” Other research areas that gained traction in CURA during Scott’s tenure include the study of aging, a field now housed in the School of Public Health, and public design, now in the College of Design. “It’s gratifying to see how today the University has many, many, many more centers and activities focused on urban issues than when CURA was begun,” Scott says.

He characterizes CURA as an “oddball” structure within the University and has fought to preserve its unique status as it has been moved from one vice president to another, usually on the academic side of the University. Currently it is situated in the Office of the Senior Vice President for System Academic Administration, and Scott’s successor, Professor Edward Goetz, reports to Andrew Furco, associate vice president for public engagement. “To me, it was essential that we remain linked closely to research and teaching,” Scott says. A critical part of Scott’s strategy has been strong faculty involvement in CURA’s work—not too surprising for a professor who has headed the University’s Faculty Consultative Committee and served as a department chair. “I used what I call the seduction model to get faculty to do projects with us,” he says. “I would tell faculty members that coming here to do research would be good for them, good for our community partners, would help educate a graduate student, and contribute to the teaching standards of the University.” As a result, faculty support has remained steady and, Scott says, the administrations that have followed that of Malcolm Moos, who was president of the University of Minnesota when CURA was founded, have been supportive “because we’ve done enough kinds of things to create linkages with faculty from across the University.”

Professor Esther Wattenberg, a nationally known researcher in child welfare and a policy and program coordinator at CURA, says working with Scott has always been full of surprises. In addition, she notes, “Along with his clear-headed knowledge of complicated

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**CURA Director Tom Scott Retires**

*by Peggy Rader*

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for one year. Application materials for the 2010–2011 academic year competition will be mailed to eligible faculty in early spring semester. For more information, visit www.cura.umn.edu/FIRP.php or contact CURA director Ed Goetz at 612-624-8737 or egoetz@umn.edu.

The New Initiative Program accepts project proposals from community organizations, government agencies, and University of Minnesota faculty and students for projects that are inappropriate for or unrelated to other CURA programs. CURA is always looking for a good new idea, and supports many new projects outside of our existing program areas. The best approach is to call us to discuss the idea; if it looks worthwhile, we will encourage you to write a brief proposal. For projects supporting government agencies, we usually seek matching funds. Maximum support for a project is generally a half-time graduate student research assistant for one academic year; support for one semester is more typical. For more information or to discuss a project idea, contact CURA director Ed Goetz at 612-624-8737 or egoetz@umn.edu.
systems both inside and outside of the University, Tom was usually ready to add sharp and witty observations on the political scene, ecclesiastical calls for moral duty, and quick solutions to the frailties of the human condition.” Scott is valued not only by internal colleagues but many external partners, too. Mike Brinda, former director of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Employment Network, remembers his work with Scott as a time when important linkages were created between academics and public workforce policy. “The importance of basing public policy on a solid research footing is often overlooked in favor of the politically expedient,” Brinda says. “Tom always advocated for the step back, the second look. He was always ready to identify the real problem, assemble a team that could address the problem, and then work with us to provide practical solutions.”

Scott initially became involved in the center through his urban-studies research as a political scientist. “I wasn’t particularly involved in getting CURA started,” he says. “It had a very activist focus in its early years and I wasn’t interested in activism. John Borchert was CURA’s first director. But after I stepped down as department chair, I took a half-time position in CURA.” Then Borchert began a phased retirement from CURA, and Scott found himself phasing into the leadership role, a position solidified after the search for Borchert’s replacement put him in the director’s chair. “Working here has been fun because of the opportunities to work with geographers, sociologists, civil engineers, designers—that cross-disciplinary kind of work is great,” Scott says.

In the past decade, Scott says, the University and community research partnerships have been redefined and restructured more than once. “The nature of our work is always in a process of change,” Scott says. Most recently, “the term ‘engagement’ hit the streets. It’s a shift in how we think about our work, and the emphasis on the value of public engagement, community engagement, has given what we used to call ‘outreach’ more legitimacy in relation to research and teaching. And that’s good for faculty who really want to do their research in partnership with communities.”

Scott sees the drive to provide more commitment to and higher visibility for engagement activities on campuses across America to be partly due to politics. “In a time of increased accountability, public universities need to answer questions from the public, who are asking: ‘What are we getting for our money?’ That climate is very different from what it was four decades ago when CURA was founded. When I came here in 1962, the U was it. It was the only player in the state and whatever we did was fine. People loved the U. I think engagement is perhaps a way to retrieve that sense of good will for the University.”

The bottom line for Scott, as he readsies to leave his office for time with children and grandchildren, is that “We’ve usually done what we’ve set out to do, and that’s been valuable enough.” The value of Tom Scott’s contributions to CURA, the University of Minnesota, and community partners statewide cannot be overstated, and we wish him well in his retirement.

Peggy Rader is communications coordinator for the Office of the Senior Vice President for System Academic Administration. A version of this article originally appeared in The Brief.

**Sustainable Development Research Opportunity Program Launched at UMD**

The University of Minnesota at Duluth (UMD) has launched the Sustainable Development Research Opportunity Program (SDROP), which provides students an opportunity to work closely with a variety of northeast Minnesota communities on sustainable development projects. Student participants will gain valuable research, project design, and project implementation experience working on community-initiated projects, and community partners will benefit from the community service provided by UMD’s finest students. The program will be housed at UMD’s Center for Sustainable Community Development.

Program directors Dr. Michael Mageau, Dr. Okey Ukaga, and Michelle Hargrave will maintain an evolving database of interested students and community projects, and will match students to projects based on interest and qualifications. Students will be expected to spend a minimum of 120 hours on a project over a one-year period for a $1,500 stipend. The first projects are scheduled to begin in spring 2010. Each year, the program plans to sponsor a project fair on campus to highlight SDROP community projects.

The program originates from Mageau and Ukaga’s work with numerous community partners through the Center for Sustainable Community Development and the Northeast Region Sustainable Development Partnership. Based on these efforts, the two saw an opportunity to involve students in community projects anchored around the theme of sustainability. Meanwhile, Olaf Kuhlke, interim dean of UMD’s College of Liberal Arts, had community service learning as a key item on his agenda. Together, the three raised the funds to get the new program off the ground.

Projects beginning this spring will include work on local food and energy systems, energy conservation and efficiency, recycling, sustainable tourism, urban and regional planning, environmental geographic information systems (GIS) applications in transportation and land use studies, eco-industrial development, environmental education and restoration, and economic impact analyses. Community partners on these projects include local city and county governments, nonprofit organizations, UMD facilities and operations staff, environmental learning centers, and small businesses.

The program is being funded by the UMD College of Liberal Arts and the University’s Northeast Region Sustainable Development Partnership, with additional funding from CURA and administrative support from the UMD Office of Civic Engagement. For more information about the SDROP program, visit www.d.umn.edu/cscd/sdrop/main/index.php.