Connecting Where It Counts: The 2011 Hennepin-University Partnership Symposium

by Peggy Rader and Anna Schlesinger

The Hennepin-University Partnership (HUP) was created in 2005 to catalyze and strengthen collaborations between Hennepin County and the University of Minnesota. Such collaborations aim to develop new knowledge through joint research, increase the sharing of both academic and practitioner expertise, and provide students with real-world experiences as they pursue their studies.

Each year, the partnership sponsors a symposium to showcase collaborations from the past year, form new connections between University and County employees, and explore the direction and impacts of the partnership. The 2011 symposium, which focused on how this partnership impacts communities, took place in the atrium of the Hubert H. Humphrey Center on the morning of February 4. It began with addresses from members of the HUP management team, including Ed Goetz, CURA director and Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs faculty member; Jan Callison, Hennepin County commissioner for the Sixth District; and Richard Johnson, Hennepin County administrator. The welcoming address concluded with keynote speaker Jennifer Godinez, associate director of the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership. In her keynote, Godinez talked about how such a partnership can and does impact communities, and highlighted two programs supported by HUP, one involving changes in county truancy enforcement to improve educational outcomes and the other using University of Minnesota students to help with data collection and analysis around homelessness.

The symposium also included breakout sessions that featured work being done in the partnership’s five focus areas: child well-being, educational attainment, ending homelessness, the impacts of an aging population, and transitway impacts. The breakout sessions included presentations from University researchers and County staff highlighting recent results from collaborations, followed by interactive discussions with participants.

The theme of the symposium’s closing panel was, “Are we connecting where it counts?” Gail Dorfman, Hennepin County commissioner and panel member, cited numerous examples of HUP activities that have benefited the University, the County, and the community, but focused on the future. “We need to evolve our partnership even further to ask not only what the research tells us, but also what the community tells us,” Dorfman said. “We need to go beyond surveys and work with the community as a true partner, not as a service receiver. We need to go from Hennepin-University Partnership to Hennepin-University-Community Partnership.”

Heidi Barajas, associate dean of the College of Education and Human Development and part of the leadership team for the University’s Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center (UROC) in north Minneapolis, praised the County’s willingness, through the A-GRAD initiative (Accelerating Graduation by Reducing Achievement Disparities—an effort to increase Hennepin County high school graduation rates), to rethink how its services could work in sync with educational goals. “For many of us at the U, it has been hard to see how higher education can become more involved in the community. [The question now becomes], ‘How can more people at the University begin to make the same kind of slight cultural shift that the County did?’,” said Barajas. Mikkel Beckman, executive director of St. Stephen’s Human Services and a symposium panel member, added, “What we do has to touch the ground.” Beckman said that HUP is critically important to his work with the homeless and more broadly to the Twin Cities metropolitan region. “My organization is so busy with day-to-day crises that we need the Hennepin-University connection to help us quantify our results, to help us discover what we’re doing right, and to help us tell our stories.”

In addition to the keynote speaker, breakout sessions, and closing panel, the symposium provided networking opportunities for University and County employees to get to know each other and discuss their work. The symposium concluded with a luncheon where Collaborator of the Year awards were given to Lisa Thornquist from Hennepin County and Yingling Fan from the University for their contributions to the community using key collaborations between Hennepin County and the University.

For more information about the Hennepin-University Partnership, visit www.umn.edu/hup.