To keep our readers up-to-date about recent CURA projects, this issue of the CURA Reporter features capsule descriptions of several newly completed projects. The projects highlighted in this issue were made possible through one of CURA's four community-based research programs, which provide graduate student assistance for community-based applied research projects, program planning and development, program evaluation, and other short-term projects. These projects represent only a portion of those that received support from CURA and its partners during the previous year.

■ The Northside Healthy Eating Project: Transportation Access to Affordable Fresh Produce. NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center is a multi-specialty medical, dental, and mental health center and human-service agency located in north Minneapolis. North Minneapolis has been described as a food desert, and its residents lack access to healthy foods. In north Minneapolis, a disproportionately low number of African American households have access to vehicles compared with more affluent neighboring portions of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Although a few large-scale grocers are located within driving distance, a substantial portion of north Minneapolis residents are not able to set out in a vehicle to purchase groceries for themselves and their families. Sarah Swingley, an urban and regional planning graduate student at the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, developed methods for improving access to fresh and affordable produce via transportation. The results are being used to guide in planning and implementing a transportation strategy to improve access to affordable fresh produce in North Minneapolis. Program: Northside Seed Grant

■ Medical Needs and Healthcare Services for the Somali Community in the Twin Cities. The Confederation of the Somali Community in Minnesota is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit mutual-assistance association created in 1994 by Somali leaders to assist in meeting the self-sufficiency needs of Somali refugees. The medical and healthcare needs of Somali people residing in the Twin Cities have not been well examined. The key research focus for the study was to determine whether a discrepancy exists between medical needs and available healthcare services within the Somali community. Ifrah Mohamed, a graduate student in the School of Social Work, conducted a literature review and held interviews and focus groups with Somali residents. The results are being used to advocate for different or improved services to meet the healthcare needs of the Somali community. Program: Communitivity

■ Social-Media Use and Evaluation in Nonprofit Organizations. The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits was founded in 1987 to meet the increasing information needs of nonprofits and to convene nonprofits to address issues facing the sector. The past five years have revealed a new era in the United States and around the world—the era of social media. Because of the popularity and viral use of social media, nonprofit organizations have begun to invest time and money into using social-media tools, often with little to no understanding of the potential impact on their organizations. Many nonprofits believe that their social-media use is positively impacting the organization, but they have no understanding or knowledge in how they can measure this. Kristin Cici, a doctoral student in evaluation studies, developed and administered an online survey of Minnesota nonprofit organizations and conducted phone interviews with staff from these organizations. Project findings will be shared with the community through a variety of means, such as trainings, seminars, webinars, and conference sessions. In addition, an e-handbook will be created that highlights best practices for evaluating social media. Program: Communitivity

■ Farmland Preservation in Minnesota. Farmers’ Legal Action Group, Inc. (FLAG) is a 24-year-old nonprofit law center that has helped many thousands of independent family farmers succeed in their struggle to maintain their livelihoods and stay on their land. FLAG believes it is important to develop statewide policies that will preserve agricultural lands throughout Minnesota. Currently, laws affecting farmland preservation are a patchwork of local, county, and state laws. Colin Cureton, a public policy graduate student in the Humphrey School, compiled research and reviewed primary documents regarding selected Minnesota counties on transfers of land from agricultural to nonagricultural use. Project findings were used to propose a model legal framework to create a consistent, effective plan to protect the natural resource that is Minnesota’s agricultural lands. This project will be used to assist the State in devising a broader strategy to preserve rapidly diminishing farmland, particularly on the urban fringe. Program: Community Assistantship Program (CAP)

■ Clinton-Grace-Beardsley School Greenhouse Project. For several gardening seasons, students of Clinton-Grace-Beardsley (C-G-B) School in west central Minnesota have been involved in a community-school garden in which they grow vegetables for the senior-citizen meal programs in town. The success of this project, through which 136 youth in 2008 and 150 in 2009 raised two dozen different kinds of vegetables in amounts sufficient to provide a meal for at least 30 senior citizens at a time, produced a positive reaction in both the school and in the community. This initial success led to the need to research the feasibility of a greenhouse at the C-G-B School site. Molly Eagan, a graduate student in the College of Design, worked with the Center for Sustainable Building Design to research siting, sizing, lighting, and heating issues and to develop a schematic design for the greenhouse. This research is being used to advocate for building an attached greenhouse at C-G-B School that will benefit students both nutritionally and educationally. Program: Community Assistantship Program (CAP)

■ West Broadway Farmers’ Market Study. The West Broadway Business and Area Coalition works to change the
economic conditions of North Minneapolis by engaging in activities designed to transform West Broadway into a place where neighborhood residents have access to goods, services, and amenities to meet their social and entertainment needs. The coalition planned to start an outdoor urban market in the summer of 2011 and needed research assistance in site selection, successful business models, and available funding sources. The new market will provide economic development opportunities for local farmers and entrepreneurs and provide improved access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy food options. Alicia Uzarek, an urban and regional planning graduate student at the Humphrey School, researched potential sites, business models, and vendors for the market. The results are being used to identify funding opportunities and inform how to create the market. 

Program: Neighborhood Partnerships for Community Research (NPCR)

Public Parking in a Minneapolis Neighborhood in Transition. The Corcoran Neighborhood Organization (CNO) is a citizen-participation organization that strives to strengthen, improve, and protect the unique character, livability, and social fabric of the neighborhood. The supply, demand, and cost of public parking have become central issues in the public conversation about the dense urban development under way on sites to the west of the Lake Street/Midtown light-rail transit station. These sites are currently vacant, underutilized, and/or used for temporary surface parking, reflecting the established “suburban” land-use patterns of the larger Hiawatha-Lake area. This pattern stands in sharp contrast, however, to the dense, urban, transit-oriented land-use pattern that is coming to the project area. A coordinated solution to parking is paramount to the success of the Corcoran neighborhood, and the successful realization of CNO’s land-use plan. Sasha Bergman, an urban and regional planning graduate student in the Humphrey School, defined and articulated the demand for parking in the project area and researched various solutions. The results are being used to guide and inform the community process around new development in the project area. Program: Neighborhood Partnerships for Community Research (NPCR)

David Forrest Awarded CURA Dissertation Research Grant

CURA is pleased to announce David Forrest, a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science, as the first recipient of the CURA Dissertation Research Grant. The grant provides one year of support to a Ph.D. candidate in good academic standing at the University of Minnesota for the purpose of completing dissertation research on a significant issue or topic related to urban areas in the upper Midwest region.

Joe Soss, Cowles Professor for the Study of Public Service at the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, praised Forrest in his letter of support as “one of the most impressive graduate students I have worked with.” He noted that Forrest’s dissertation research “has the potential to make significant contributions to the scholarly literatures on policy advocacy, political representation, and the positioning of marginalized populations in U.S. politics,” as well as to “yield some important lessons and warnings for people who work on poverty and housing advocacy.”

Against the backdrop of the recent housing crisis and recession, Forrest’s research explores the role that political activists play as representatives of marginalized groups of urban poor people, focusing specifically on anti-poverty activists in Minneapolis and their efforts regarding housing and the foreclosure crisis, public education, and welfare rights. Using field research and drawing on contemporary democratic theory, Forrest investigates how political activists’ efforts serve to construct the “urban poor” as a political group with a shared identity, and position them as stakeholders in relation to institutions such as school boards and banks. Ultimately, Forrest is interested in understanding how these constructions impact both the voice of the urban poor in the policy-making process and the larger structural causes of poverty in the United States.

An article summarizing Forrest’s dissertation research will appear in a future issue of the CURA Reporter. For more information about the CURA Dissertation Research Grant program, visit www.cura.umn.edu/Dissertation.php.