Abstract: This article provides an account of how innovation is achieved when mutu-
ally beneficial partnerships are established as an ongoing and essential component of
the discovery process. The authors describe the research undertaken jointly by the
Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO) and University of Minne-
sota researchers, but focuses on the unique partnership between MCNO and University
researchers that has been sustained because of the investment all sides have made in
Hmong families in North Minneapolis, as well as in the outcomes of the research. A
key component to the ongoing success of this partnership is that University researchers
have invested with the MCNO in working with Hmong families in North Minneapolis.
MCNO is a program of CURA.

It is often difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the relation-
ship between an organization and a community begins to take shape. With
the ongoing relationship between the Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO; see sidebar on
page 5) and the North Minneapolis Wat
Tham Krabok (WTK) Hmong commu-
nity, that exact moment occurred at a
drinking fountain located in North
Minneapolis. MCNO’s work with the
newly arrived Hmong community
began in the spring of 2005 when
two Hmong boys, wanting to practice
speaking English, approached MCNO
staff member Jay Clark at a water foun-
tain and said hello.

The two boys described above are
a part of the approximately 15,000
Hmong refugees who were resettled
in the United States shortly after their
unofficial refugee camp on Wat Tham
Krabok Buddhist temple grounds in
Thailand were closed by the Thai
government. In 2004 and 2005, Minne-
sota received 4,972 “Wat Tham Krabok”
refugees, with Hennepin Country

receiving 29% and Ramsey County receiving 63% of these refugees. Families resettled in Hennepin County were housed primarily in North Minneapolis in predominantly African American neighborhoods, where they had to deal with isolation, high levels of poverty, and challenges with the public schools that their children found themselves attending shortly after their arrival.

The initial meeting between Clark and the boys led to a conversation about what the WTK Hmong kids liked and did not like about their neighborhoods. In their first contact with WTK Hmong kids, MCNO staff found educational issues they were unwilling to leave unresolved: kids were having a difficult time in school because many were getting hit on the playground, on school busses, and at bus stops, and were housed all day in English language learner (ELL) classes speaking to one another in Hmong, but were not learning English. According to MCNO staff, the students and parents, unable to speak English and not knowing how the system worked or what their rights were within that system, had not been successful in their attempts to demand changes.

MCNO staff formed a boys’ soccer team and later a girls’ volleyball team as a practical way to respond to the situation WTK Hmong kids and families described. These spaces became safe places for kids to come together and talk about their lives in an active environment. Through the soccer program, MCNO learned that the students faced other problems:

- There were several K–8 Hmong classes with more than 35 students in one classroom, and one class with close to 50 students.
- At the high school in North Minneapolis, all students living within two miles were excluded from school transportation. The exclusion caused Hmong families to worry, because students had to walk to school past known drug houses and areas known for prostitution.
- Not enough Hmong-speaking teachers were available in the Minneapolis Public Schools in north Minneapolis.
- All newly arrived Hmong high-school students were required to go to one

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The Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing (MCNO) provides training, technical assistance, and support to organizations and people involved in grassroots, issues-based organizing. MCNO works to engage and involve underrepresented constituencies in the life and leadership of community-based organizations. Central to MCNO’s work is the belief that the people who are the most affected by decisions should be central to the decision-making process. MCNO does not choose the issues that are the most important to communities, but instead works with communities to identify their own issues and needs, and provides the training and support for communities to develop strategies and solutions rooted in community leadership. MCNO is a program of CURA and, although it is housed at the University of Minnesota, it receives most of its funding from external sources. Key ongoing MCNO initiatives include training staff in neighborhood-based organizations, organizing in new-immigrant communities, and playing a leadership role in the Corridors of Opportunity Community Engagement Team (www.metrocouncil.org/planning/COO/CommEngage.htm).

MCNO’s work with the WTK Hmong moved from listening to organizing in the fall of 2005, when students reported that their Hmong teacher had been replaced by a series of other teachers who spoke neither Hmong nor Thai. With the assistance of MCNO staff, the students organized two meetings with a Minneapolis Public Schools’ board member. A total of 160 WTK Hmong students and parents turned out and told the school-board member that they needed teachers who could speak Hmong and English. After hearing their concerns, the school-board member agreed to their request. WTK Hmong students, building off this success, were instrumental in gaining additional resources that improved their Minneapolis public-school experiences, including more bus stops, smaller class sizes, more Hmong-speaking teachers, and a Hmong magnet school.

Even with the changes in the Minneapolis Public Schools, newly arrived Hmong families were interested in exploring other options. Some families enrolled kids in Hmong charter schools. After hearing about the Choice Is Yours (CIY) program (see sidebar, page 6) from MCNO staff, some Hmong families also took advantage of this opportunity. MCNO staff members were aware that the WTK Hmong students faced challenges regardless of the school, but a particular CIY school appeared to be succeeding with Hmong students—at least according to students and families.

One CIY school and the WTK Hmong families with students attending that school expressed an interest in finding out if there was a way to document what they considered an educational success story. MCNO staff turned to University of Minnesota resources to find people who could help. They wanted to find researchers with expertise in educational practices, but had found in the past that questions they thought ideal for an academic study were often met with indifference on the part of University faculty. The interest in documenting the educational experience of Hmong kids participating in the CIY program prompted Clark to contact Heidi Barajas, an associate dean and faculty member in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota. Barajas took on the project and proceeded to build an engaged research team by enlisting the help of a research assistant, Kari Smalkoski, a doctoral student in CEHD with more than 10 years of experience working with immigrant students and their families.

Anecdotal reports of public schools meeting the needs of new immigrant students make a good news story and interest multiple stakeholders, including schools and families, as well as communities that are always seeking evidence on ways to help kids successfully navigate educational opportunities. Moving beyond anecdotal information, Barajas and Smalkoski chose to engage in an investigation that was collaborative, beginning with the framing of the research. Discussions among MCNO staff, school administrators, and the researchers provided key insights into the development of the research questions. Research was based on three assumptions: that the particular history, current geography, and experiences of this particular group of Hmong students was important; that understanding the similarities and differences in how students, families, and institutions viewed success was key to understanding the experiences of both students and school staff; and that student success would be explored and defined from the perspective of students, their families, and teachers and staff at the school. To discover what, in terms of both the individual and the institution, was in place to support student success, the research focused on two research questions:

- How do urban Hmong students and their families define and negotiate success in a suburban school?
- How do teachers and staff at the school define and negotiate success for Hmong students in comparison with the rest of the school’s population?

**Partnership and the Discovery Process**

One of the key components of engaged research design is to gain the support and trust of multiple stakeholders, which in this case did not just include Hmong families and school staff. Internal University of Minnesota partners, such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), second-generation Hmong American students with expertise to act as cultural informants, and partners such as MCNO and CURA, were all important to the research design required for the project. For example, it took several months for IRB approval to be granted because working respectfully with recent immigrant groups did not always align with traditional University IRB requests. Several conversations with the IRB occurred to discuss the underpinnings of an engaged research-study design with a particular population.

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3 The University of Minnesota IRB reviews research projects that involve people to uphold two broad standards: that people are not placed at undue risk; and that they give uncoerced, informed consent to participate.
A similar process was required to gain support and trust with the suburban school district where the WTK Hmong students were attending school through the CIY program. The school district approval was immediate and, while working through the University IRB process, the researchers met with the principal of Suburban Junior High (SJH). SJH received the first wave of WTK Hmong students placed through the CIY program, and continues to serve many WTK Hmong students. As part of a predata-collection process, Barajas and Smalkoski engaged with the school and home communities by visiting SJH, talking with MCNO staff to gather more detailed information, and attending Hmong girls’ volleyball events so that they became familiar faces connected to the work with WTK Hmong families.

The process for obtaining consent took into consideration the engaged nature of the research, the comfort of the community members involved, and the requirements of the IRB. Community-engaged research requires time because it is an investment in the community. Community research partners have their own rules that University researchers must follow—not the other way around. In this case, Hmong families gave trust to those already working within the community. Yia Yang, a second-generation Hmong American and community organizer at MCNO, already had well-established relationships with newly arrived Hmong families, and the research team agreed that it would be best if he obtained consent from Hmong parents to interview their children who attended SJH.

Yang, Barajas, and Smalkoski worked as part of a research team and made decisions about the best possible situation in which community members would participate. The relationships developed by the team driven by a common goal provided incentive for Yang to invest his time. As part of the research team, he participated in meetings about the construction of research questions, the protocols, and a plan for obtaining consent, which included a lengthy three-part process of meeting with families. In addition, to comply with IRB regulations, he completed a required online training program regarding protection of individuals participating in research projects. The commitment to complete this training was at his discretion rather than a directive.

Four second-generation Hmong American undergraduate students—Linda Yang, Pa Yang, Nae Ree Yang, and Ashley Yang—joined the team as cultural informants, interpreters, and translators. As non-Hmong researchers, Barajas and Smalkoski discovered all four women had expertise in areas they had not considered. For example, at a team meeting the undergraduates shared that working with community elders required using formal language and established who was most comfortable translating in that situation. Each member of the team played a strong role, contributing to the project in unexpected and important ways.

The undergraduates were included in research meetings where they discussed research questions, protocols, and general direction of the data collection. In addition, the undergraduate team members conveyed that the opportunity to interact with newly arrived Hmong immigrant families was personally beneficial.

As the work progressed, the team heard from the community that the engaged process of discovery was important and appreciated. For example, a second-generation Hmong American attorney who resides in North Minneapolis and is a former soccer coach to many of the WTK Hmong boys included in the research project confirmed how necessary the research is, indicating that “besides MCNO, nobody is paying attention to these boys or their families.” A seasoned skeptic of any outsider coming in to do “research” on the Hmong community, he has been appreciative of the ways in which the study has been conducted by two non-Hmong researchers. He also relayed to Smalkoski that he feels certain that the research team’s commitment to the WTK Hmong community in North Minneapolis is genuine.

Research Findings
Barajas and Smalkoski first completed their interviews with the SJH principal, associate principal, and 15 teachers, along with general observations about the school. As Yia Yang continued the three-part process of obtaining consent with parents, Barajas and Smalkoski began interviewing parents and conducting focus groups with their children who attend SJH.

The data collected provided some interesting findings. Overall, teachers’ perceptions of Hmong students were overwhelmingly positive. They described WTK Hmong students as hardworking, organized, respectful, and polite students who value their education. However, the team observed substantial differences in the ways teachers described Hmong girls in comparison with Hmong boys, as many teachers noted verbatim, “Hmong girls just know how to do school.” The achievement data support this finding. In overall grade point average (GPA) and on standardized tests, Hmong girls almost always outperform Hmong students almost always outperform Hmong students with respect to achievement in reading, writing, and on standardized tests. In general, Hmong girls almost always outperform Hmong students in reading and writing. Additionally, Hmong girls outperform Hmong boys in standardized tests in reading, writing, and math.”

The Choice Is Yours (CIY) program is the result of a 2000 settlement after the Minneapolis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sued the state of Minnesota alleging that Minneapolis Public School students were being denied an adequate education. Through the CIY program, Minneapolis Public Schools students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch can apply to enroll in any of nine suburban Minneapolis Public Schools districts in the Twin Cities west-metro area. The CIY program serves approximately 2,000 low-income Minneapolis children. It is funded every biennium through Interdistrict Desegregation or Integration Transportation Aid (M.S. §124D.87) in the Education Finance bill.

The CIY program is not the only program that is funded through this statute, but it is perhaps the most visible and vulnerable because of the initial genesis of the program as a time-limited obligation under the consent decree resolving the NAACP lawsuit.

The Choice Is Yours Program

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boys; however, as a group, they still lag behind many of their non-ELL classmates. By looking at course-taking patterns, GPA, and teacher comments, the findings suggest that WTK Hmong students are making steady academic progress. In addition, all students interviewed stated that their academic English is continuing to improve.

Research findings also indicate that WTK Hmong students particularly thrive in ELL and science classes. ELL classes are considered “safe spaces” for students, where they can express themselves in a supportive environment and are taught by competent, well-qualified teachers. At the time the interviews took place, SJH was offering innovative pedagogical practices such as paired coursework and content-based instruction. In a paired course, for example, an ELL teacher is paired with a science or civics teacher so that students are able to develop both academic language and knowledge in the course content at the same time. Although expensive, the principal at SJH at the time saw the value for such courses and supported them by shifting resources. In general, WTK Hmong students took advantage of the abundance of free academic activities and programs, and almost all of them participated in the school’s badminton program, which serves as an important social and peer connection. Overall, data indicated many positive school practices were in place at SJH to support WTK Hmong students’ educational success.

Findings also indicated that opportunities existed to consider additional supports for educational success. During interviews with parents, it became clear that WTK Hmong parents were not only disconnected from other WTK Hmong parents, but that they were disconnected almost entirely from SJH teachers, staff, and families who live within the boundaries of the school district. An unexpected benefit of the interview process occurred when one of the first WTK Hmong fathers interviewed expressed an interest in talking with other WTK Hmong parents who also had children attending SJH—something he had not considered before the interview and what could result in a critical school connection for all WTK Hmong parents. In this case, collecting data for a research project provided a reflective process for a parent who formulated an idea to help support his family and neighboring WTK Hmong families.

**Discovery and the Benefits Beyond Research Findings**

Part of the overall discovery process was continued observation of SJH students participating in everyday activities; these observations often led to beneficial outcomes not directly related to research findings. One activity was a Sunday-night tutoring program at CURA, from which students continue to benefit. This program is one of the few available for students who cannot get tutoring help at home from family members, and it gives students an opportunity to connect with many second-generation Hmong American tutors who are undergraduates at the University of Minnesota. Discussions between Barajas and Clark about the benefits of bringing WTK Hmong students to campus led to a brainstorm of ideas about additional opportunities that could benefit the students. One of these ideas was to provide a workshop on going to college. With the support of colleagues in CEHD, Hmong junior-high and high-school students participated in a workshop focused on the college-application process, financial aid, and general strategies for preparing for college. The workshop was well attended and students enthusiastically asked insightful questions about their current and future college applications.

During the workshop, one student indicated she had applied to the University of Minnesota but the application was at a standstill. She and her family did not know what to do or who to contact. Because she was now connected with individuals from the University, she was able to obtain guidance from those individuals and complete the needed information, and was admitted. She has now successfully completed her first year of college in CEHD. A second session was created the following fall semester, which was also well attended. Barajas and Yia Yang are currently in conversation with staff at SJH to collaborate these efforts. Providing workshops and creating future opportunities for this group of students has had immediate and future benefit for both the WTK Hmong community and the University of Minnesota. The process of engaged discovery provided the necessary perspective that an observed community need, if responded to, was understood as a mutually beneficial venture.

Unexpected outcomes connected to the discovery process also occurred for many of the second-generation Hmong American research assistants. For example, Pa Yang said that listening to the ways in which one of the teachers in an interview talked about WTK Hmong students brought up unexplored feelings for her. Nae Ree Yang had always wanted to connect with newly arrived immigrant families, but was never sure how. She was unaware of the CURA Sunday-night tutoring sessions and was immediately interested in volunteering. Her experiences with the project also sparked new conversations with her parents and grandparents about their own experiences as newly arrived...
immigrants to St. Paul, Minnesota, in the mid-1980s. As a college student, this experience contributed in new ways to her own identity process as a young Hmong American woman.

The research team also gained insights not directly related to the research questions. For example, Smalkoski attended a community event organized by MCNO staff to discuss the imperative need for a Hmong police officer in North Minneapolis. She witnessed what the WTK Hmong community was experiencing and began to understand the vital role of MCNO in advocating for WTK Hmong families and providing a platform for them to advocate for themselves. Experiences such as this provided additional levels of commitment to the project as team members became linked to the overall concerns of the community. Smalkoski also relayed that when talking with her fellow graduate students throughout the University about the project, they often noted the research design provided a structure of built-in mentorship that encouraged equal contribution that appeared to be a unique aspect of an engaged-discovery process.

One activity was more directly impacted by the availability of the research findings than by the discovery process in general. Clark requested data from the study to support his efforts in advocating for WTK Hmong families with the state legislature. Due to the efforts of MCNO staff, the WTK Hmong students who attended suburban schools through the CIY program had, over the past three legislative sessions, participated in state-capital visits and spoken to legislators about the importance of the program. The information that they provided to policy makers was not based on bigger picture aspects of the program, but rather on personal narratives about why it was important to them, what it meant for their future plans, and how transportation was essential for them to access the same educational opportunities as other students.

As an essential part of the engaged process, the research team provided a report summarizing its research findings to the school and MCNO staff as the first dissemination product. Although the team had not anticipated a broader use of its executive report, it provided Clark with the report to support his advocacy work at the legislature. Armed with preliminary data, WTK Hmong families were able to successfully argue for the continuation of transportation so they could continue to attend CIY schools. Information in the executive report was one of the missing pieces in the story. Data gave the personal narrative a deeper level of analysis. Just as facts are not enough to persuade policy makers of the necessity of a program without some deeper connection in the form of personal stories, narratives on their own are not sufficient to persuade policy makers that the expenditure of public funds is necessary.

The last example is related to one of the major nonacademic findings of the study: a growing conflict between WTK Hmong and African American male youth both at SJH and in their North Minneapolis neighborhoods. This finding prompted the researchers to talk with community organizations working with WTK Hmong youth to assess what the community may or may not want to do to address the situation. In addition, researchers talked with colleagues whose research focuses on Hmong youth and families. One colleague is Zha Blong Xiong, an associate professor in the Department of Family Social Science. Xiong’s research on school achievement and Hmong American in the United States to receive tenure at a top-tier research (Research 1) university, as well as a respected leader in the Hmong community. He has been invited to partner with the University of Minnesota’s Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC)—a place-based organization in North Minneapolis that links the University and community in vital partnership—as a faculty affiliate to work with the project. An outreach effort resulted in an event with Xiong and Hmong families at UROC to share information from this project, as well as Xiong’s research on school achievement and the Hmong.

Looking Ahead
Community engagement, according to O’Meara et al., “has been one of the major innovations within higher education over the last 20 years.” At the center of this innovation is the benefit of partnership and reciprocity—innova-

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tion that is not a precursor to research activities, but rather an essential part of the discovery process. As a Carnegie-identified institution,\(^6\) the University of Minnesota has taken great strides through its Office for Public Engagement to define engaged scholarship and to provide faculty with professional development opportunities. Engaging with community in discovery can provide mutual benefit for communities and the University, yet this process is often identified simply as “outreach.” A dominant image associated with research is a “scientist” going through a process of discovery in a laboratory setting. In this project, discovery occurs in the context of building trust and getting to know a community. Engagement is not a precursor to the work of research, but is an essential step in engaged scholarship. The willingness of community members to answer questions, share information, and be honest when the answers to questions can be at times difficult is enhanced by including people with community relationships who can operate as connectors to the University.

MCNO staff understood early on that in order for community-identified research issues to be addressed, it would require a bridging of a relationship between researchers and families. Because the relationships between MCNO and the WTK Hmong families were the result of years of work and effort, and were critical to the ongoing work with the WTK Hmong community, MCNO staff had to be confident that the work of the researchers would enhance and not compromise community relationships. This confidence was developed through conversation with researchers and the reputation that preceded them. In addition, MCNO was not merely passing off a relationship, but taking an active role in an ongoing process.

MCNO and the research team continue to strengthen their partnership through an established partnership with UROC. Work with WTK Hmong families in North Minneapolis provided a rationale for MCNO to be officially affiliated with UROC. MCNO has utilized the UROC building for events related to outreach to WTK Hmong youth and families and has assigned office space in the building. In addition, the MCNO- UROC partnership was able to identify and provide specific outreach to Hmong families immediately following the May 2011 tornado in North Minneapolis. Barajas and Smalkoski continue their scholarly work by presenting their findings at conferences and other academic venues (oftentimes with MCNO staff members Margaret Kaplan and Yia Yang). The team also has plans for public presentations and coauthorship of multiple publications, including journal articles.

As with dissemination of appropriate documents for community use, disseminating findings to academic audiences provides a benefit to future research, and informs practice and policies for Hmong children and families. Sharing outcomes in the frame of an engaged research project provides an opportunity to show academic colleagues that engaged research is a scholarly endeavor that employs specific and rigorous methods for discovery. The effort to build and maintain partnerships is essential to the discovery process and, as a model, may contribute to the sustainability of the work between the research institution and the communities with whom it works.

There is no immediately obvious connection between a large public institution like the University of Minnesota and a couple of Hmong boys informally discussing what they think about their neighborhoods and schools after a chance encounter at a school water fountain. However, programs like MCNO, centers like CURA and UROC, and colleges like CEHD have the ability to rewrite the terms of engagement between public institutions and communities. In this case, researchers and community organizers came to the table with specific skill sets and expertise that separately do good work. Aligning the work and sharing expertise can create a partnership that is doing work that would not likely have occurred in their separate areas. In its own ways, and now as a new partnership, the research team will continue to connect with families to address the issues that people care about most, and ensure that the University and communities continue to work in partnership to respond to the city’s most pressing urban issues.

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\(^6\) The Carnegie classification acknowledges significant commitment to and demonstration of community engagement that improves teaching and learning, and generates socially responsive knowledge to benefit communities. To be selected, institutions must provide descriptions and examples of institutionalized practices of community engagement that show alignment among mission, culture, leadership, resources, and practices.