Impacts of CURA Projects

The Summer 2012 issue of the CURA Reporter presented our first annual report. It summarized nearly 200 activities that CURA supported during the 2011–2012 academic year. In this issue, we look beyond those numbers to see what differences past CURA projects have made. Because it often takes time to see the impact, this report focuses on projects completed two years earlier, during the 2009–2010 academic year. Data reported here were gathered during fall 2012.

This report presents the results of contacting more than 100 people involved in those projects. Each person completed an online survey that asked both quantitative and qualitative questions. We provide community and student answers to specific questions, followed by sample quotes from individuals that provide details about his or her project and the impact it has had. For faculty, the answers to questions are followed by a comprehensive list of journal articles and other professional publications related to CURA-supported faculty projects. Lastly, we briefly summarize the impact of eight exemplary projects. They represent significant achievements for the community in areas of importance to them.

Six CURA programs supported the projects and activities included in this report:

- **Community-Based Research** (CBR). Provides a graduate research assistant to community organizations in the inner cities, suburbs, and Greater Minnesota.
- **Community GIS** (CGIS). Provides mapping and analysis services to neighborhoods, nonprofits, and local governments in Minnesota.
- **Community Growth Options**. Supports faculty and graduate student work with local governments on the fringe of the Twin Cities metropolitan area that are working to address development pressure.
- **Faculty Interactive Research Program**. Supports faculty addressing critical issues facing the state of Minnesota.
- **Hennepin–University Partnership** (HUP). Supports strategic collaborations between the University of Minnesota and the state’s largest county.
- **Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing** (MCNO). Builds capacity of neighborhood organizations and helps organize nascent groups of underrepresented people.

**Community Benefits**

CURA works with many nonprofit and government organizations in a given year, with as many as 50 benefitting from a University of Minnesota graduate student research project (which typically represents 200 hours of effort).

In this section, we report on 20 community organizations that responded in 2012 to our questions about their CURA-supported research project conducted two years earlier.

More than three-fourths (86%) of respondents said the project had significant impacts on their organization. According to those respondents, the impacts were substantial.

- 53% indicated that the research leveraged new partnerships for their organization
- 76% experienced some lasting impact from the research
- 59% stated that the research resulted in programming changes within their organization
- 35% reported that the staff capacity increased due to the project
- 65% said that the project increased their social or political capital (e.g., relations with other organizations, credibility with decision makers)
- 24% indicated that the research helped them secure outside funding for their organization
- 18% stated that the research informed or influenced public policy
- 29% reported that the research led their organization to further interactions with CURA or other University departments

These same respondents identified the overall value of the CURA-supported projects to their organization as follows:

- 18% described the value as critical, affecting what they do on a daily basis
- 47% described the value as very useful, providing them information that is leading to changes
- 35% described the value as useful, helping them understand issues/needs, even if they cannot address them

We also asked the project supervisors from these community organizations to tell us about the nature of the impacts that each CURA project has had. Here we provide a few of their responses:

We could not have made the May Day Festival green without the assistance of a CURA intern! The research was worth it! …

With the assistance of the CURA program, we have set a standard for other events in the Twin Cities to follow!

—Paul Robinson, Heart of the Beast Theater

The research and the report were of high quality.... While the project didn’t lead to direct changes within the organization or the project this study supported, it did influence our understanding of broader issues around access to fresh produce and to share that information with other key stakeholders.

—Julie Nielsen, NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center, Inc.

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1 The surveys were part of an evaluation of CURA programs. This report is intended to present the positive impacts of community engagement, but we also took note of comments and suggestions that will help us improve our programs.

2 In addition to these programs and several others not listed, CURA has some limited flexibility to support projects that fit none of our existing programs; Professor Fennelly’s immigrant civil rights project described in this report was supported in that way. In addition, CURA staff members participate in and lead various local, state, and national organizations.

3 Some of the students are actually advanced undergraduates or enrolled at another Minnesota institution of higher education, such as St. Cloud State University or Macalester College.
The impact of this project is still in process. We are creating a new nonprofit organization [North American Owl Center] as a result of it, and the data will be critical as we move forward with our business plan and fundraising.

—Karla Bloem, Houston Nature Center

This was a first step in refining our organization’s youth evaluation processes. Some recommendations that came out of the project we implemented immediately, such as adding a postproject evaluation to our process. Others we are in the process of implementing, such as refining our questionnaire to better measure the change we are seeking to facilitate in youth who participate. Overall [this] was a solid project … solid and foundational to our work.

—DeAnna Cummings, Juxtaposition Arts

Student Benefits
CURA employs approximately 50 students each year to work on research projects proposed by community organizations, both nonprofit and governmental. Those projects are selected in an open competition based on the potential value of the project to the community. We contacted 69 students whose projects had been completed between spring 2008 and fall 2010. According to respondents, the academic and professional development value of their CURA-supported projects was significant.

- 57% said they were able to apply their academic coursework to their CURA project
- 43% said their project experience proved useful in subsequent coursework
- 86% made a formal presentation of their research findings, usually to the organization itself, but 25% also presented to an outside organization
- 28% said their CURA project led to their current job either directly or indirectly

We include here some personal testimonies from the respondents that provide additional insights into the value of their CURA work:

My CURA project was beyond transformative for me as a student, educator, youth worker, and citizen … I cannot say enough how incredible this project was. It has undeniably influenced the course of my life.

—Joanna Krebs, MEd Youth Development Leadership, College of Education and Human Development

My CURA research assistantships were the most intellectually formative and professionally useful aspects of my graduate experience. My work with [the East Side Neighborhood Development Corporation] through CURA provided me professional contacts that led directly to my current role as a planner at the National Community Stabilization Trust.

—Cassie Moen, Master’s of Urban and Regional Planning, Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs

My CURA experience led me to be more involved in issues in my local community … I have volunteered more since my CURA experience and have also kept up with more local issues. I am still in contact with those [who] I worked with in my CURA experience three years ago.

—Heidi Eschenbacher, Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development, College of Education and Human Development

Faculty Benefits
A typical faculty research project supported by CURA covers one month of summer salary and a half-time graduate research assistant for the academic year at a median cost of $40,000 per project; some faculty projects cost significantly less. The CURA Reporter presented the results of 13 CURA-supported faculty research projects in the three issues spanning our 2009–2010 reporting period. We contacted these faculty two years later, asking about the impact of their CURA project. According to respondents, the impacts were as follows:

- 54% had published at least one academic article, adding to the literature on urban and regional issues. Another 23% had articles in development or submitted for publication. Several of those with one published article are now working on additional articles or, in one case, a book on the project topic.
- 77% had used their project as the base for an additional funding request, resulting in more than $900,000 in funding for research building on their Minnesota-focused research.
- 46% reported their work had informed or influenced public policy. For example, Dr. Susan Galatowitsch’s work has influenced climate-change vulnerability assessments in the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.
- 77% said their CURA project had advanced their academic career, including one respondent who was promoted to full professor, based in part on her CURA project.
- Of the 11 projects that involved a graduate student, 100% said the student gained intellectually or professionally. Several students developed their master’s or Ph.D. thesis from the project work. Many students are now in careers related to these faculty projects.

Faculty Publications. The following articles have been published or are forthcoming. These faculty and others whose work has been featured in the CURA Reporter are developing additional publications.

- Patrick Bajari (Economics, College of Liberal Arts)

In this section, we highlight eight exemplary projects from among the more than 150 that CURA supported during the 2009–2010 academic year.

**Development Controls in Minnesota’s Lake Region.** Crow Wing County has won state and national awards for its new land-use ordinance. A CURA student research project was an important part of that effort. In 2010, the Region Five Development Commission in Staples asked for assistance in reviewing land-use plans for local units of government around the Gull Lake chain of lakes and identifying similarities and differences. This was part of a collaborative effort that included the Brainerd Lakes Chamber of Commerce, the Initiative Foundation, and Cass and Crow Wing Counties. Their goal was a more uniform, consistent land-use planning strategy throughout the region. Based on work by that collaborative, Chris Pence of Crow Wing County’s Land Services Department notes:

Crow Wing County made substantial changes to the land-use ordinance, including reducing the ordinance by 80 pages while adding common-sense performance standards such as stormwater plans, shoreline buffers, septic-system maintenance, conservation design, among many others. The ordinance also streamlined the process and made it easier for citizens to obtain permits. Based on customer feedback from citizens and contractors, the ordinance has been a huge success. Throw in awards from the AMC [Association of Minnesota Counties] and NACo [National Association of Counties] and it seems as though others throughout the country ... agree.

**2010 U.S. Census Participation in Minneapolis.** Like many other cities, Minneapolis’ response rates for the 2000 U.S. Census were lowest in the inner city, particularly among poor people and people of color. Because of CURA’s community connections, the City of Minneapolis contracted with CURA to help organize a better response in 2010. MCNO reached out and worked with community organizations that are important to residents. Response rates improved dramatically, giving Minneapolis the best response rate of any city in the nation with more than 300,000 residents. The Harrison neighborhood, at the south end of North Minneapolis, improved from 43% participation rate in 2000 to 63% in 2010.

**Opening Access to Geospatial Data.** During the 2009–2010 year, CURA’s associate director Will Craig was president of the National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC). NSGIC’s mission is to promote statewide geospatial coordination activities in all states and to be an effective advocate for states in national geospatial-policy initiatives that support a national spatial-data infrastructure. Under Craig’s leadership, NSGIC clarified the extent to which its 501(c)(6) status allowed it to lobby, allowing him to testify before Congress about the value of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s air-photo program to state and local governments. NSGIC began to push a national address registry that is critical...
Experiences in Denmark and other countries show that a publicly available Hmong officer who could understand them. They overcame problems included a local gang takeover of an apartment by their inability to communicate with the police. Their course material across Minnesota and the nation. A credit-granting public-safety certificate course being offered by the Humphrey School. Fennelly sees a high demand for the personnel. Some of the modules are being incorporated into that can be used to train current and future corrections officers looking to supply the local-food needs of the Twin Cities area. County officials contacted CURA, which subsequently conducted a series of studies through its Community Growth Options program. Those studies led to the development of a county Farm Advisory Board, composed of local farmers. Brad Davis, head of the Scott County Planning Department, says that the board members regularly “refer to the CURA studies as the basis for information, tactics, and strategies.” Based on the CURA research, the Farm Advisory Board endorsed and Scott County approved two new land-use categories in the county’s zoning ordinance—Agricultural Tourism and Farm Market—to accommodate the needs of small agricultural entrepreneurs. Scott County is also looking at how to incorporate into its toolkit the transfer of development rights, one of the tactics recommended by the CURA research as a way to preserve large areas of agricultural land while diverting future growth to already-developing communities.

The Civil Rights of Immigrants in Detention Centers. Interviews with attorneys representing detained immigrants, both legal and undocumented, in Minnesota showed serious violations of their rights. The study was conducted by Professor Katherine Fennelly and master’s students Jacob Chin, Jose Pacas, and Charles Miles of the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, with financial support from CURA. One of the problems, according to Fennelly, is the lack of understanding by personnel at the detention centers of the special characteristics of immigrants in detention, or the particular issues that they face. The Ramsey County Sheriff asked her to prepare training materials for his staff on immigration. Fennelly developed an online course consisting of six modules that can be used to train current and future corrections personnel. Some of the modules are being incorporated into a credit-granting public-safety certificate course being offered by the Humphrey School. Fennelly sees a high demand for the course material across Minnesota and the nation.

Hiring Hmong Police Officers in Minneapolis. A growing immigrant Hmong population in Minneapolis was frustrated by their inability to communicate with the police. Their problems included a local gang takeover of an apartment building and an errant police raid that struck an unsuspecting Hmong family. Hmong families, with help from MCNO, a CGIS map, and a CBR project, campaigned for three years for a Hmong officer who could understand them. They overcome initial opposition from the precinct commander by enlisting support from Mayor R.T. Rybak and Minneapolis city-council members. Officer Kou Vang was introduced to the community on February 11, 2012.

Adapting to Climate Change. As the 2007–2008 Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs, Susan Galatowitsch completed a 20-year ecological study on restored wetlands and launched new research on climate-change adaptation. The publication on the wetland restoration study was selected as one of the 30 most influential contributions to the journal *Wetlands* in 2012. This recognition contributed to Galatowitsch being selected as a fellow in the Society of Wetland Scientists. The work on climate-change adaptation produced the first downscaled climate projections for Minnesota and resulted in a publication in *Biological Conservation* that is now widely used for climate-change adaptation planning in the state. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, for example, is relying on this work for its conservation-vulnerability assessments that are currently underway.

Housing for Developmentally Disabled People. In the not-too-distant past, most people with lifelong mental or physical disabilities were sent to state-run institutions and given varying levels of care and respect. Today many live in group or foster homes in their own communities, and some live independently. Hennepin County is committed to making this system successful by better accommodating all people with developmental disabilities, reducing dependence on the already overburdened foster-home model, and decreasing costs to taxpayers without compromising the quality of care for individuals and families in need. Hennepin County’s Division of Public Health came to CURA looking for new ideas to reach these goals. HUP engaged a capstone workshop at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, which found and documented a range of valuable programs operating in other states. Some of these national examples led to changes in the County’s service delivery policies. Other approaches are not viable in Minnesota because of current state statutes, and the County will be proposing legislation in future Minnesota legislative sessions to address these barriers.

Conclusion
The impacts from CURA projects during the 2009–2010 academic year are substantial and represent something in which we take great pride. Both the community and the University benefitted from working together. The community gained knowledge that has a lasting impact on their work. Students developed professional skills. Faculty addressed critical social issues both in their immediate CURA applied-research project and in subsequent professional work.

The last time CURA conducted such a comprehensive self-study was 2007. Compiling it has been a significant effort, one that we cannot repeat each year. Nonetheless, we believe it provides some insight into what we do and what we hope to accomplish year after year.