



KRIS NELSON COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PROGRAM

Get to Know CURA's Kris Nelson Community-Based Research Cohort

2025 - 2026



Center for Urban and Regional Affairs | **cura**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



VONGRATHAYUTH HINGPHITH

He/him

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Where I Call Home:

I have spent most of my time in Southeast Asia, specifically in Cambodia. Coming from a small region, I tend to call many places home as long as I feel a connection to them! It has been a pleasure moving and working in different countries, and now I am settling into Minneapolis, Minnesota. After four years in the land of a thousand lakes, I can confidently say that I consider this home as well! I believe that home is more communal; wherever your people are and where you feel connected to others, that is truly home.

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

policy analysis and coalition-building.

Values That Shape My Work:

My approach to community-based work is grounded in community-centeredness, reparation, and structural change. As a queer immigrant educator, I've seen inequities firsthand in Cambodia and the U.S., shaping the empathy and humanistic lens I bring to research and design. Through CURA projects with the Legal Rights Center and River Bend Nature Center, I learned how stories and data can fuel advocacy and accountability when returned to communities in useful ways. I believe research must be collaborative, non-extractive, and rooted in equity—amplifying voices, building power, and creating lasting impact by centering those most affected in the solutions.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

I was in a room with my closest friend or family, sharing a story we'd never heard before. I don't care much about what's on the table or what I am eating, but I am excited about the stories that matter to my loved ones.

Academic Background

- PhD in Comparative and international development education
- Expected End Date: 2028
- Focus Areas: Education, Equity, Social Justice

Relevant Tools & Skills

qualitative interviewing, facilitation, relationship-building, conflict mediation, project management, multilingual communication, graphic design

Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Community Health & Wellbeing
- Racial and Social Justice Movements
- Housing Justice & Anti-Displacement
- Education Equity & Youth Dev



PAULINA VERGARA

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Where I Call Home:

Columbia

Academic Background

- PhD. Natural Resources Science & Management
- Master's in GIS
- Fourth Year
- Focus Areas: Environmental management GIS

Relevant Tools & Skills

GIS mapping, systematic reviews, project management, data visualization

Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Transportation Equity & Built Environment

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Policy analysis, quantitative research methods, Power BI

Values That Shape My Work:

I ground my work in respect for local knowledge and lived experience, ensuring that equity and inclusion guide decision-making so diverse voices shape outcomes. By valuing farmers' expertise alongside scientific research, adapting methods to local realities, and maintaining trust through presence and follow-through, I aim to build sustainable tools and evidence that communities can use to advocate for their rights, influence policy, and safeguard their environment.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

My favorite meal would be fried fish with plantains, a fresh mango salad, and coconut rice, enjoyed with an ice-cold glass of passion fruit juice. I would share it with my family on a beautiful Caribbean beach in Colombia, with the sound of waves in the background, the warmth of the sun on our skin, and the laughter of my loved ones making every bite taste even better.



JONAH UDALL

he/him

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Where I Call Home:

I grew up in Berkeley, California, and I have lived on all sides of this country--in Miami, Florida and New York City for a combined 12 years--but I am quickly making Saint Paul my home with my wife since we moved here last Spring.

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Data visualization, policy analysis, a broader array of research methods, qualitative data analysis, knowledge and familiarity with many new areas of work

Values That Shape My Work:

Over the past year and a half, I've worked with marginalized Twin Cities communities to advance health and wellbeing through nutrition-focused policy and systems change as part of the now-defunded SNAP-Ed program at UMN Extension. As a white, cishetero man raised far from Minnesota, I strive to practice accompliceship by building trust through listening, transparency, and resource-sharing. I aim to bridge community strategies with public investment, lived experience with policy, and traditional knowledge with academic institutions--disrupting entrenched interests to strengthen community advocacy and resource community-driven solutions. For me, collaboration is creative, iterative, and rooted in earned trust, where all voices contribute to building what none could create alone.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

I love cooking for friends. I am recalling many a wonderful evening in my wife and my tiny Brooklyn apartment making crepes, and serving 4-5 of our close friends around a coffee table we used as a floor-seated dining table.

Academic Background

- PhD in Nutrition
- Second Year
- Focus Areas: Public Health, Food Justice

Relevant Tools & Skills

Facilitation, cross-cultural collaboration, participatory research, coalition building, public speaking, community-based project management, Spanish proficiency

Interest Areas:

- Community Health & Wellbeing
- Racial and Social Justice Movements
- Housing Justice & Anti-Displacement
- Environmental Justice & Sustainability



NATALIE LAVENSTEIN

she/her

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Where I Call Home:

I was born in Alaska and raised in Chicago, which gave me a deep appreciation for both wild landscapes and vibrant urban communities. I later moved to Utah for college, where I studied environmental and sustainability issues and spent lots of time exploring the mountains and desert. After graduating, I found my way back to the Midwest—drawn by a love for the North Shore and a desire to be part of a region that is central to building a climate-resilient future. I lived in Duluth for a couple of years and now call Minneapolis home while I pursue a masters in Urban and Regional Planning.

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Data visualization, GIS, advanced data and statistical analysis.

Values That Shape My Work:

In my experience, building trust takes time, and I've learned to take the "go slow to go fast" approach in collaborative work. Meaningful collaboration goes beyond token involvement—it's about creating authentic spaces where all stakeholders are active participants. It involves deep listening, co-creating strategies, and adjusting based on feedback. Everyone brings valuable expertise, whether through lived experience or professional knowledge, and it's crucial that these voices are integral to the collaborative process from the start.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

My favorite meal would be served family-style on a gorgeous wood table in our backyard on a sunny summer evening, surrounded by family, friends, and neighbors. The air is warm, and there's a soft breeze as we share laughter and stories. We're enjoying fresh pasta, made with tomatoes and herbs from the garden—simple yet delicious.

Academic Background

- Master's in Urban and Regional Planning
- First Year
- Focus Areas: Land use, land access and anti-displacement, climate resilience, and environmental justice.

Relevant Tools & Skills

Community engagement and facilitation, relationship-building, land use planning, project management, public speaking, policy analysis, survey design and analysis, research translation, feasibility studies.

Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Transportation Equity & Built Environment
- Housing Justice & Anti-Displacement
- Immigrant & Refugee Rights
- Economic Justice



ALANA HADLAND

she/her

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Where I Call Home:

Minneapolis

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Policy analysis and data visualization

Values That Shape My Work:

I served two years in AmeriCorps with Habitat for Humanity in Saint Paul, which grounded my commitment to community-based work. Since then, I've worked with Minnesota nonprofits focused on housing, mental health, and food security, and now at the Great Plains Institute I facilitate a nonpartisan coalition of labor, nonprofit, and industry stakeholders advancing industrial innovation for people, the environment, and the economy. These experiences shape my belief that communities hold immense wisdom to drive durable change, especially in climate solutions, and that collaboration rooted in shared values, deep listening, and respect for diverse perspectives is key. Through my degree in Science, Technology, and Environmental Policy at the University of Minnesota and my work at Great Plains Institute, I hope to support and empower communities to co-create solutions that reflect their priorities while valuing progress over perfection and collective growth over individual agendas.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

I was at J. Selby's in Saint Paul eight years ago with my now husband. It was our first date. We ordered a bunch of food, including cauliflower wings that looked and smelled soooo good, but we were both too nervous to eat any of it. We eventually sheepishly asked for to-go containers for all of it. We still love to go there and fortunately get to enjoy eating the food these days, too. 😊

Academic Background

- Master's in Public Policy
- First Year
- Focus Areas: Climate and stakeholder convening to discuss energy policy and solutions

Relevant Tools & Skills

Facilitation, relationship building, consensus-based coalition building, project management

Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Community Health & Wellbeing
- Voting & Civic Engagement



DANIEL ANTONIO HERNANDEZ LINARES

He/him

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Where I Call Home:

I am from Colombia and have been living at CTC-UMN for four years.

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Social and research context in English (sociolinguistically), public policy, and geopolitics of the global north.

Values That Shape My Work:

Since 2007, I have been working in participatory action research, community work methods, and work with diverse and vulnerable populations from a decolonial perspective and from the epistemologies of the South. My experience, fieldwork, and history allow me to work comfortably with the community and contribute to it in two ways. I work with clear responsibilities, clearly defined tasks, creative freedom, leadership, coordination with key players, and the opportunity to identify a work team based on affinity rather than selection.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

Pasta with chicken and mushrooms

Academic Background

- PhD in Natural Resource Science and Management
- Third Year
- Focus Areas: Rural studies, anthropology of the state, economic anthropology, political economy, political ecology, social metabolism, GIS, mixed methods, IAP

Relevant Tools & Skills

Mixed and qualitative methods, public policy analysis, differential approach, intersectionality, critical thinking, research methods and methodologies, QDA software, fieldwork methodologies, reflexivity, fieldwork, information analysis, project coordination, teaching, and trans- and multidisciplinary approach.


Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Community Health & Wellbeing
- Racial and Social Justice Movements
- Immigrant & Refugee Rights
- Economic Justice & Business Dev



EVAN DAVIS

He/him

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Academic Background

- Public Affairs - PhD (Urban Planning)
- Sixth Year
- Focus Areas: Environmental justice, community development

Relevant Tools & Skills

project management, qualitative methods (interview, focus groups, document analysis, participant observation), GIS, R, some Python

Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Racial and Social Justice Movements
- Economic Justice & Business Dev
- Housing Justice & Anti-Displacement

Where I Call Home:

Minneapolis has been my home for 10 years now!

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Coalition building, collaborative research, mixed methods research

Values That Shape My Work:

I value community insights and expertise as a way of creating more just planning practices. My work has always been either steered directly by or in collaboration with community members/organizations. I value the relationships that we form through the research process and how that depends on the mutual exchange of ideas, skills, and knowledge. I hope my/our work will facilitate community members to connect with me/us/each other, and with academic institutions. In doing so, I feel that we can build our own capacity and the capacity of people in the community to organize for their/our own well-being and self-determination. This involves moving resources, financial, social, and informational, into the community from the university. It means using my/our skills and expertise to reveal barriers to community self-determination. It also means to nourish and give precedence to the skills and expertise in community for future organizing work.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

It's a homemade pizza night with friends and family (some close people you know well and some new people you don't know or don't know as well). Everyone brings their own ingredients and makes a pizza to share with everyone.



JOVIN LASWAY

He/him

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Where I Call Home:

For me, home is really two places:

- Where I live now: Minneapolis, Minnesota. It's where I study, teach, and do most of my current research, and it has become a strong base for both academic life and community.
- Where I've historically called home: Tanzania, where I grew up. That's still a very central part of my identity and sense of belonging, my family, culture, and roots are there, and I return often.

So in a way, I feel I have two homes: Minneapolis as my present academic and community home, and Tanzania as my enduring, personal home.

Areas I'm Hoping to Grow:

Getting better at turning data into clear visuals and stories; building skills in participatory and qualitative methods to complement quantitative work; strengthening the ability to translate research into policy impact; and growing confidence in public speaking

Values That Shape My Work:

I value humility, respect, and listening first. Growing up in Tanzania and working in diverse communities taught me that lived experience is as important as technical expertise. I approach community-based work as a partnership—building trust, centering real needs, and ensuring research supports advocacy and accountability. For me, meaningful collaboration means shared ownership, respect for all voices, and lasting relationships that return value to the communities most affected.

A Meaningful Meal or Tradition:

My favorite meal is a simple one: I'm back home in Tanzania, sitting outside with my family on a warm evening. We're sharing ugali with grilled tilapia from Lake Victoria, fresh vegetables, and spicy pilipili. The food is delicious, but what makes it special is the laughter, stories, and sense of togetherness around the table.

Academic Background

- Applied Economics, Ph.D.
- Fourth Year
- Focus Areas: macro-development economics. I use structural economics to study how big shocks shape household, firm, and bureaucratic decisions, and how these micro responses add up to long-run development outcomes.

Relevant Tools & Skills

Quantitative & Statistical Analysis, Spatial & GIS Analysis, Data Management & Integration, Project Management & Collaboration, Communication & Mentorship, Multilingual Abilities

Interest Areas:

- Environmental Justice & Sustainability
- Racial and Social Justice Movements
- Economic Justice & Business Dev
- Housing Justice & Anti-Displacement
- Edu Equity & Youth Dev
- Community Health/Wellbeing
- Voting & Civic Engagement