

# **Building Community-University Partnerships: Learnings from Practice for Institutions and Individuals Engaged in Urban and Other Partnerships**

Geoffrey Maruyama, Martin Adams, Hilary Gebauer, Maki Kawase, Timothy Sheldon,  
Bhaskar Upadhyay, and Robert Jones

University of Minnesota

The contents of this document were developed largely under grant #P116B070062, from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement of the Federal Government should not be assumed.

Copyright © 2011.

## Preface

This engagement guide is intended to provide readers with information that will help them as they work to build sustainable community-university partnerships. It focuses on urban partnerships, and is largely based on our experiences over several years in building community-university working teams to help address issues central to the vitality of our partner communities. The work was part of broad efforts by the University of Minnesota to develop sustainable partnerships with urban communities. Although our examples and focus are urban, the learnings and processes should apply as well to non-urban issues, for rural and small town areas are facing many of the same issues as urban and metropolitan areas, and principles of partnership development transcend settings. The work engages faculty and professional staff who bring their conceptual perspectives and methods and tools to address the issues. But it also involves students, for today's college students will need skills to address urban and other challenges as they move through their careers.

The guide summarizes information about processes that we have used as we have attempted to nurture and expand partnerships and how those processes have worked or not worked. It draws from specific experiences in developing and implementing community partnerships and collaborative projects that are illustrated in greater detail in a more extensive guide through case studies and narratives describing specific projects and partnerships and how they developed. Many of our peer institutions have been engaged in similar efforts, for post-secondary education institutions are becoming more systematic in their efforts as interest in urban engagements as long-term investments of time and energy is increasing. Nevertheless, support that we received from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education (FIPSE) has allowed us to focus on the processes of engagement, and to be more intentional in engaging partners, tracking and documenting our progress and evaluating our experiences, and to go into greater depth examining and understanding dynamics and processes underlying the work. For the FIPSE support we are very grateful. It allowed us to develop three areas for collaboration. Those yielded four different collaborative topics. It also provided what Kania and Kramer (2011) have called "backbone," staff who are able to organize and coordinate work. Having a number of projects in different areas and with different partners has been extremely valuable, for it provided us with multiple "replications" of partnership building that allowed us to look at commonalities and uniquenesses across the different projects and to better understand what might be idiosyncratic to a particular project and what seems to be more likely to occur across projects. The topics and types of projects we developed likely are similar to many established by other institutions, for they cover issues of education, job skill development, community development, economic vitality, and health.

Questions that have emerged during our work and that we have been considering as we developed this guide include:

- Why should universities engage in urban/metropolitan work? (Section 1 in our longer version of this guide)
  - What are perceived benefits (and challenges) of community/University partnerships?
  - What does it mean to engage in urban/metropolitan work?
  - How does the work relate to other university interests, priorities, and responsibilities?
  - How do urban engagements relate to other types of community engagements of universities? How are they distinct, and how similar?
- What do institutions need to think about as they start or expand doing urban work? (Section 2 in the longer guide)

- What resources might they need?
- Who from the university should be engaged in planning the work?
- How might they decide: how much to focus their efforts, how much to seed a range of new efforts to see what emerges, and how much to focus on bolstering existing urban engagements?
- Looking toward the community, what process is used to develop partnerships? (Sections 2, 3, 4, 5)
  - How do universities assess issues and challenges, and set priorities and allocation of resources for work in the community?
  - What kinds of and how many partners should they consult in initiating the work?
  - How and how much does the work need to link to existing and ongoing work done by university faculty and staff, and how are linkages created and sustained?
  - How might particular types of activities become the building blocks for long term urban community engagement?
- What approaches to program evaluation could be used to collect data and document impacts? (Section 6)
- What have we learned about building and sustaining engagement across time? (Section 7)
  - Based on our experiences, what seem to be distinguishing features and essential elements of effective urban engagements?
  - How might engagement be sustained as central to the university mission and system?
  - How much can serendipitous events or broader social changes affect our work, and can we plan for them?

In the remainder of this guide, we describe work that has attempted to build partnerships with a challenged urban community to address disparities. While addressing the questions listed above, the guide provides both conceptual framing for the work as well as lessons learned from our experiences working with communities. It examines the roles of post-secondary institutions in creating changes and how to develop engagement processes that can succeed.

## Why should universities engage in urban/metropolitan work?

*[M]ost universities continue to do their least impressive work on the very subjects where society's need for greater knowledge and better education is most acute. (Bok, 1990).*

We live in a time that has been called the age of the city (e.g., Katz, Altman, & Wagner, 2006). The United States of the 21st-century includes rapidly changing demographics, with larger, more diverse populations concentrated in cities. Eighty-three percent of people in the United States now live in urban/metropolitan areas. Those areas drive and dominate the U.S. economy, are homes to wealth-generating industries, centers of research and innovation, ports of commerce, and gateways of immigration (Katz, 2007). At the same time, urban/metropolitan communities experience stresses and challenges at unprecedented levels, including concentrated poverty, crime, unemployment, inadequate housing, changing demographics, and rapidly widening disparities in access to and quality of education, health care, and commercial goods (Porter, 1998).

Urbanization carries with it the challenges mentioned tied to disparities. Urban communities have a difficult time prospering if substantial parts of the communities are unsuccessful and their lack of success spills over, affecting the quality of life of all urban residents. In order for our society to thrive in the 21st Century and remain a world economic power, our urban areas need not just to survive but to flourish, for they now de facto define our economy. And flourishing will not occur unless populations that have experienced relatively low levels of educational and occupational success are more effectively integrated into society, for they comprise an increasing proportion of our population, our urban population, and our workforce. Ignoring or bypassing them has personal and collective consequences, for our success requires their success.

Research affirming the importance of addressing disparities includes nation-level data indicating that large income inequalities within societies damage the social fabric and quality of life for everyone (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). The United States is among the countries with the greatest inequalities, and urban areas display the stark contrasts between “haves” and “have nots.” Urban communities need help, and solutions need to be more than “band aids” that cover up problems; they need to create changes that reduce future problems and challenges and that reduce disparities.

Universities, and particularly public universities, are anchor institutions capable of engaging communities in meaningful ways (e.g., Weiwel & Perry, 2008). Through their combined educational research, teaching/professional development, and public service missions, universities are often the single greatest resource available to communities for addressing and solving local problems and challenges—and that resource can be used more effectively, for much of the research capacity of universities remains untapped—thus far not examined for its potential impact on social problems and challenges.

For many institutions of higher education, work addressing social concerns and challenges is mission-driven. In particular such work represents core activities of urban-focused and land grant institutions in fulfilling their mission in a 21st century urban age. For other institutions, it represents their commitments to being good and responsible citizens in their communities and to creating public good. Most universities sit within or very near communities that face challenges including social inequality and disparity. Addressing inequalities through engaged research, teaching, and outreach/service not only helps address issues underlying the present disparities, but it also attunes all members of the university communities (e.g., faculty, students,

community members) to the complexities of the challenges. This engaged work provides authentic experiences through seeing the consequences of inequality first-hand and working with people in those circumstances.

For higher education institutions, mutually beneficial community-university partnership has great potential to create engaged, publicly-minded citizens that society needs to compete in the world of the 21st century (Checkoway, 2001, Holland & Gelmon, 1998; Percy, Zimpher, & Brukardt, 2006). At its core, the work recaptures the public service mission of higher education (e.g., the Morrill land grant act of 1862) by infusing that mission into research and teaching activities, and by focusing on serving the needs of people in their communities. Said differently, the work of engagement crosses the research, teaching, and service/outreach missions of universities. It complements basic research by translating that work so it can usefully be applied to important social problems and issues, keeps teaching relevant to the lives of students and their families, and organizes outreach and service so they continuously link theory and research to practice.

A great opportunity of engaged work is that it publicly affirms the importance of universities in improving lives of citizens while creating in its students engaged, publicly minded citizens. It ideally creates in more of our college graduates strong senses of community, inter-connectedness, and shared fate; and commitment to creating public good. It also can help build within the academy a greater understanding of the importance of collectively addressing disparities in our society. The challenges of implementation are many, ranging from creating unrealistic expectation about university capabilities to address and solve complex problems, the time and resources needed to address the array of problems faced by any society, concerns of partners that resources go to universities rather than to communities, and the need to build capacity in communities to successfully address issues over a long term. And on the university side is the challenge of building capacity, developing skills of university faculty, staff, and students, and identifying human and other resources to commit to the work. One concern is that too often within the higher education culture, issues of power, privilege, and opportunity are side-stepped in community engagement work, so the learning opportunities are diminished. The lack of focused attention to these issues diminishes institutional capacity to produce impactful and meaningful work that engages and benefits communities and the broader society.

Historically, the land grant mission formalized a unique role for land grant Universities as a partner with the state in generating, applying, and teaching about new knowledge and discoveries. The act promoted integration of knowledge generation, teaching, and application. While once relegated primarily to the “agricultural” and “mechanical” arts and sciences, the role is now understood as more broadly applicable to the generation of new knowledge and discoveries in the arts, sciences and humanities that profoundly shape and influence the U.S. future on every level. The stakes in this role are human progress, achievement, global competitiveness, and the quality of life for all. The move that some might view as an expansion of the mission seems to us simply an updating of a broad and enduring mission of public service and partnership in addressing social needs and supporting economic development. Many non-land grant institutions would agree, arguing that they also share that mission. Affirmation of the importance of urban areas to post-secondary education comes in part from more recent creation of higher education institutions dedicated to urban areas and issues.

Ernest Boyer has argued that work like that described in this guide is integral to the future of research universities. In *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), he posed questions about how knowledge can responsibly be applied to consequential problems, and whether social problems can themselves provide an agenda for scholarly work. His questions are key, for they firmly anchor urban engaged work to the core missions of land grant as well as other

research universities. Linkages come through the four different scholarships identified by Boyer—discovery, integration, engagement, and teaching. And they touch the three key missions of land grant and other research universities: research, teaching, and outreach/public service. Work in urban communities includes: (1) basic research conducted in field settings, applied research translating theory to practice, and problem-driven research applying academic tools and approaches to better understand complex social issues; (2) research and training experiences for graduate and professional students, and research and service learning experiences for undergraduates; (3) community-based outreach opportunities for individuals from all across the University to volunteer in ways that meet their needs and skills, and (4) service from outreach professionals in numerous areas like health care, nutrition, youth development, and gardening. Faculty engaged in urban partnerships take their experiences back to the classes they teach and allow it to shape the research they conduct, contributing to reciprocal systemic changes in relations between teaching, research, and community issues.

In addition to moving beyond the traditional land grant disciplines, today's engaged work differs some in the nature of the communities in which the work is done. In smaller rural communities of the past, advantage and disadvantage were proximally located, and communities were socioeconomically diverse. In contrast, in larger metropolitan areas today, along with larger populations there tends to be greater stratification, and many urban communities or parts of communities are largely comprised of economically and socially disadvantaged populations. That dynamic changes somewhat the nature of the work, for many of today's communities struggle to meet the needs of their population. Universities are not just "value adders," but core providers of knowledge and also services.

### **What do institutions need to think about as they start or expand doing urban work?**

This document describes ways to engage that can effectively support urban and other partnership efforts addressing issues including learning, health, and economic opportunity. Such efforts not only benefit universities' research and teaching, but help universities meet collective and individual responsibilities to address the needs of the people. As urban agendas are developed, institutions need through their collaborations to become more specific in defining what the community and state residents should and should not expect. Regardless of what universities do in establishing partnerships and meeting unmet needs, no one should expect them, for example, to be a service provider for all unmet needs or to conduct research on all possible issues. Such expectations are as unrealistic as expecting a flagship research institution to educate all of the students of its state. There simply are not sufficient resources, nor is such an approach most effective or efficient. Although they likely will address many key issues, universities do not possess the resources to address all possible issues, and likely are not the most efficient or cost-effective in addressing many issues. They need to find their way through possible engagement issues, finding those where there is sufficient interest and capacity while focusing effort and resources on their core educational missions of research and teaching.

An important facet of accountability is creating effective and regular communications about the work and accomplishments. Effective communication structures provide regular and focused information about what the university is doing and accomplishing. Clear communications also help with another key to doing engaged work, which is managing expectations of partners—universities will not engage and see problems automatically disappear, yet some community residents seem to expect that once the researchers are involved, resources will appear and problems will be solved. The greatest optimism is articulated by some in our partner community who have mentioned that our presence eventually could lead to gentrification of their

community—and worry that they may not be able to afford to continue to live there.

Another important opportunity for universities in partnership building is to step forward as conveners. They can use their unique credibility tied to their status, expertise, lesser personal self-interest as “arms length” outsiders to community problems, access to theory, research, and effective practices, and perceived absence of preconceived ideas about the “right” approach (people recognize that universities have many opinions about almost any issue) to convene diverse stakeholders to address important issues. Our experiences have been that in many instances, who convenes stakeholders is critical—for that sets up dynamics of power and control. Universities as conveners can help direct attention toward common goals and interests and away from interpersonal conflicts and individual self-interest until an agenda is set and a sense of common purpose is developed.

*Establishing Partnership Principles.* In building urban partnerships, processes need to be characterized by their openness so that what the university is doing is not perceived as secret or hidden. Ideally, openness is communicated through transparency with respect to goals and processes. Our Urban Agenda Task Force Report that articulated institutional commitment, included the following elements of our urban work:

- (1) Deliberate, intentional, and strategic across the institution;
- (2) Grounded in the creation of multi-disciplinary teams and sustained, respectful partnerships;
- (3) Built on the basic teaching and research resources of the University, melding Boyer’s (1990) scholarships of discovery, integration, application/engagement, and teaching;
- (4) Anchored, where possible, by a physical presence in communities where the issues to be resolved are most prevalent;
- (5) Focused on work leading to measurable outcomes with significant impact;
- (6) Broad in scope, addressing needs of the increasingly diverse populations; and
- (7) Inclusive, drawing expertise from all across our comprehensive university as well as from the communities with whom we work (e.g., Gibson, 2007).

*Recognizing university benefits of engaged partnerships.* As university faculty, staff, and students think about partnerships, it is important for them to recognize what Lewin (1948) called mutual benefits of cooperation between *experts in theory* (researchers) and *experts in practice* (community partners). Community partners understand local conditions that might disrupt or invalidate a particular theory-derived approach, and their expertise needs to be acknowledged and tapped. They also have a general tacit understanding of their community, which can help smooth the path for the university people. And the partnerships help students gain valuable experience, researchers understand the limits of their theories and the realities of applied work, and the university to become better engaged with and aware of the needs of the community.

*Addressing perceptions about engaged work.* Schon (1998) has called laboratory work the high ground and applied and engaged community-located work the “swamp,” reflecting its messiness and lesser control. The process of engaging external partners, coming to agreement with them about what is to be done and what the roles are of the different partners, and carrying out research in field settings adds challenge compared to working in laboratories and/or studying college students participating for college course credit, where control is almost complete. Community-engaged research often is viewed and described as “messy” rather than “complex,” as “noisy” rather than as “realistic,” with samples that are “difficult” rather than “representative,” even though they are as much the latter as the former. As we were working on this guide, we had a meeting with one of our communications people, who kept using the term “messy” to describe the work. As can be seen from the case studies we report, challenges are real, much more than mythology about the work. Despite the challenges, however, it is surprising that

advantages of engaged research tied to external validity are not made more prominent. For example, one concern of laboratory researchers, false positives--inaccurate findings produced by participants trying to positively self-present or responding to try to please the researchers, seem less of a concern in engaged partnership work, for participants are less interested in figuring out what the researchers are trying to do and find, and partners have no motivation to produce findings that are inaccurate or not replicable. They are not college students fulfilling requirements for courses, but people trying to improve their lives.

*Methods of engaged research.* There can be substantial tension and disagreement within universities about the kinds of engaged research that universities should be doing in communities. Some people within universities hold the view that the only work that should be done is “authentic partnership work.” They also may argue that the methods should be limited to a method like participatory action research (e.g. McTaggart, 1997), which is research largely defined and conducted by community researchers, addressing community issues. In contrast, others argue that in order to be most effective and engage the university most broadly, engaged research needs to be allowed to draw on a full range of methods, approaches, and types of relationships. Individuals taking that perspective argue that awareness of and sensitivity to community perspectives about and reactions to the research is what is most important, rather than the particular type of research. They contend that imposing a ‘litmus test’ of acceptable research produces an exclusiveness/eliteness that may put off colleagues and prevent the work from gathering widespread support and engagement within the university.

Our experience has been that discussions of these issues are important, but very difficult. At some point they need to occur, for university engagement cannot succeed if there is a lot of internal criticism of work being done and a single ideological view about the work. Taking the view that an engaged researcher needs to have a critical race theory (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) perspective or a participatory action research perspective (e.g., McTaggart, 1991) will inevitably limit participation, probably in undesirable ways by politicizing the work and tying it to particular ideological perspectives. Although we have struggled some with these issues and have seen impacts and negative consequences of researchers who don't work effectively with communities, the most effective partnerships--ones that can move the work toward the center of universities--are ones that reach out to and engage people with interest in community work, and that recognize that learning and education of participants are part of the developmental process.

*Resources.* Based upon our experiences, universities need to allocate resources to new urban initiatives if they want them to work. First, as Kania and Kramer (2011) note, “backbone” for partnerships (aka infrastructure) is key to developing new and expanded partnerships, for someone has to take on the work or organizing activities, collecting data and analyzing them/ evaluating successes, and informing partners/communicating the outcomes. The work can be supplemented by drawing attention of partners to resources already available, and augmenting them while using existing infrastructure to manage the work. Not duplicating existing capacity or developing redundant services is important, for doing so isolates new work rather than being able to use it synergistically. In our case, existing small community grant programs not only were visible financial resources, they also offered smaller community partners chances to develop their capacities, for example, increasing their skills in grant writing, building understanding of how to attract external funds, and developing relationships with university faculty and staff.

Once an institution decides on its level of resource allocation, University partners need to be very clear and transparent about what University resources, human as well as financial, exist to support partnerships. If funds have limited uses or there is no funding available to support



particular types of projects, there needs to be a clear and consistent message about this. There also needs to be agreement about what constitutes a resource. While we at the university may believe that we have a number of important resources available, such as evaluation capacity, student volunteers, research efforts, understanding of best practices, etc. But some of them may not be seen as particularly valuable or useful resources by our partners. In some cases the idea of these things as resources may be foreign and/or abstract to non-university partners, but more likely is that these in many instances don't reduce costs of providing programming or expand programming, so they are not viewed as helpful resources. University partners also need to acknowledge the resources that community partners possess by their locations and programs, for without them, the opportunities to work within the community would not exist. When different partners are discussing what they are able to contribute, resources needed should be described (e.g., time, space, clients, data, money, staff time) and partners given time to discuss within their organizations what they can contribute to the partnership. For example, when our facility was still under renovation, many of our partners offered their space without charge for our meetings, which was critical to our early efforts to get work going. Ideally, partners all contribute, and feel respected for their contributions. If there is the perception that some partners are "freeloading," the group needs to determine what else might be asked of them.

Because universities like ours are so large and complex, community partners likely begin with unrealistic expectations about the scale of resources that universities can provide. Many participants from the community seemed to be unaware that the university has many different units, and that many units in different colleges and departments are required to self-generate funding for the projects that they are doing, not to mention staff salaries. Unfortunately, university operations are not transparent and are very complex to explain. As a result, in addition to challenges we faced in creating understanding of our budgetary limitations, we also faced challenges helping initial partners to grasp the extent to which university faculty and staff have constraints on their time and resources, and that in much of what they do, they have to generate their own resources through grants or contracts.

*University partners.* We invited university people both already working in urban communities and those with interest in beginning to do so. We sent out a general invitation, but the most effective way we had of engaging people was using a "snowball" approach where individuals who found out about our work were asked to invite anyone else they knew who they thought was interested. This approach resulted in a healthy core of people regularly engaged plus a larger group that was less directly involved but who wanted to keep informed about the work.

As we have reflected back on attributes of colleagues instrumental for our work, we identified skills, experiences, and an orientation to the work of building community-university partnerships that we believe they tended to hold. Complementing their skills were their connections to a broad network of university and community contacts who could be engaged. Among the personal characteristics and interests, key areas of expertise, skill sets and orientation to the work that we thought were instrumental to our project are the following:

- possessing professional experience and expertise and personal interest/knowledge that gave them access to theories and research findings that could contribute to program development in the key focus areas (these individuals typically were faculty)
- interest in and motivation to interact with community service agencies, policy and advocacy organizations, and schools, plus some experience actually doing that (Faculty members, researchers, project staff and administrators)

- frequent experience engaging in inter-disciplinary collaboration across departments, colleges, and universities, and with community based organizations (professional staff)
- familiarity with hands-on work with clients and community residents in urban settings
- particular interest, experience and expertise in the content areas of our work (healthy foods, nutrition, urban agriculture, after school programs, youth services and entrepreneurship).

The characteristics at least in part reflect prior experience in similar activities and settings, and that they include possessing content relevant to the working groups and their themes. In addition to experience, they also possessed strong substantive knowledge related to the issues and know how to translate that knowledge in applied settings, and they are in general collaborative in their professional activities.

*Identifying and coordinating with work already ongoing in the community.* The initiation of the work described above was by no means the first effort to forge university/community relationships. A number of projects, largely initiated by individuals or units of the university rather than administratively, were already ongoing within the community as the University developed its attempts to work more intentionally and coherently. Existing relationships can be incredibly helpful, yet care needs to be taken to ensure that the university and community partners in those relationships do not feel like their relationships and/or work is being exploited. Often, these partnerships have taken years to develop and trust has been built between university staff/faculty and the community group. People entering such relationships need to be cautious about intruding into those relationships and to take cues from the partners while being respectful of the relationships that already exist.

One of the initial steps of our work was to identify existing relationships and partnerships between the University and organizations working in the community as well as existing work already being done by community organizations who could become partners. These existing efforts represented both opportunities and challenges for the University's work in the community. They provided a base from which to build, yet they also created potential concerns from non-university partners that the university partners would try to turn the work into a research project and to control work that had already been ongoing even though the community partners often understand that work much better than do their university partners. Perhaps the worst thing a university can do is give the impression that once the university is involved, good things will happen that haven't already been happening. As well as offending those already doing work, it can lead to unrealistic expectations about what will happen, particularly if the university partners naively express optimism without fully understanding the issues and their challenges. If (when) those are not fulfilled, disappointment among community members can undermine accomplishments of the partnership.

**What processes are used to assess issues and challenges in the community, and to set priorities and allocation of resources for work there?**

*Addressing existing perceptions and preconceptions.* When we began work, the perception of a substantial number of residents in the community was that prior University research had cast the community in a negative light, treated them as something to be studied and analyzed, and was perceived as disrespectful of them and their community. Because of those less than satisfactory prior interactions with people from the university, many community residents did not fully trust what university people were saying about why they were interested in working in and with communities and doubted whether the university in fact was committed long-term to the community. Our experiences seem not to be atypical of what can happen in challenged

communities where relatively few residents have attended and completed college, for the residents have lesser understanding of research and what universities do.

*Building trust.* Beyond the perception issues, major obstacles to agreement that we encountered were largely practical in nature, tied to power, dynamics of relationships, and so forth. One prominent obstacle is lack of trust. Kania and Kramer (2011) even suggest that creating trust across many partners requires years of regular meetings and shared work. Reaching an agreement will be hindered by communities' and universities' lack of trust and skepticism about others' motives and intentions. Developing relationships based on partnership efforts where there is minimal university commitment seems likely to disrupt rather than build trust. We were struck by how often the same negative examples came up. The number of community-university interactions that produced reticence if not negative community perceptions and comments about a university seemingly were not large in number. Unfortunately, they had disproportionate impact; community perceptions can be soured by a relatively small number of researchers who create ill feelings, even if most researchers are working in respectful partnerships with communities. Given how strongly perceptions can be shaped by single events, it probably is not possible to overstate the importance of developing trust, which is not just about collaborating on a single project, but about developing sustained working relationships based on mutual commitment and benefits.

*Identifying appropriate and capable partners.* A major challenge in building community-university partnerships is to determine the organizations and individuals in the community and the university who could be effective partners. Some community people and organizations that express interest and enthusiasm in working with the university may not turn out to be the most effective partners. Similarly, some potential university partners may not be well-suited for the partnership, for they may have limited interest in work beyond what they want to do. In some cases, we found insufficient alignment of goals and objectives across prospective partners, and groups decided that a partnership on a particular topic didn't make sense. In others, community needs were more immediate than the partnership process would offer, so potential partners moved ahead on their own. Engaging universities is often slow compared with the speed of smaller, nimble organizations with clear and precise goals and needs to address. But University partnerships can bring greater knowledge plus human and financial resources to the issue, which may increase effectiveness and create greater impact and sustainability. Some prospective partners may come looking for resources or employment opportunities. Still other prospective partners may not be effective in moving work forward, but may still help identify and illustrate the kinds of needs that are present and where help is needed. Finally, in contrast to those who seek us out but didn't have capacity to help create changes, some individuals and organizations with resources and who could be strong partners may be less forthcoming. In our case, some current partners were busy and wanted to be sure that what we wanted to do would help them accomplish what they needed to do before they were willing to join in.

Although characteristics we identified for effective community partners may be idiosyncratic to our circumstances and are at least partly anecdotal, they were:

- organizations that value and participate in research and evaluation to shape and direct program direction and efforts
- organizations that make use of data analysis, measurement of impact and documentation of specific program outcomes
- organizations that have a history of effectively serving their constituency over time and demonstrating expertise within their field
- organizations recognized by their peers and funders for sound administrative and fiscal management

- organizations whose boards and staff reflect knowledge of, and/or representation from, their client and constituent populations

The above characteristics all point to larger, stable organizations as partners. We don't know if our experiences are similar to those of colleagues from other institutions of higher education, but it probably is the case that such organizations have values and approaches more similar to those of universities, which would make working with them seem easier. And they have capacity to get work done. In contrast, a number of our smaller partners have not survived the recent economic downturn, and others have had to limit their activities as they faced budget challenges. As we continue to move our work forward, we have been trying to see if there are different approaches that would be more successful in working with smaller organizations with limited staff.

### **What processes can be used in developing partnerships?**

*Selecting activities for partnership efforts.* As work began, we focused on three priority areas established by the Coalition of Urban-Serving Universities as well as by the Urban Agenda Task Force report. Fortunately, these areas resonated with residents. Two community agencies, the Northside Residents Redevelopment Council (NRRC) and NorthPoint Health and Wellness, Inc., a Northside certified public health medical clinic and social services provider, conducted listening sessions for community residents to identify the issues that the community felt were most important and those where the University might partner. Those meetings yielded the same three areas as the USU and task force reports, even though the language differed slightly. The community language indicated the greatest needs as: (1) education (broadly defined), (2) economic and community development (including safety and housing), and (3) health, particularly insofar as it includes violence prevention.

In each of the three focus areas, we convene groups of community and university individuals with skills and experience addressing the particular issue. Sub- areas were selected to tap existing university and community expertise and experience. Groups developed collaborative foci and projects. For three years each group had support from the project coordinator, graduate student assistants, and others, plus modest money to support group activities (a retreat each year plus meetings). The first meeting of each group was a general “meet, greet, and find out what’s on people’s minds” meeting. We explored who else should be invited to join the working groups. Then the next three meetings, with expanded membership, collectively moved the group toward a specific action agenda. The first meeting focused on issues/challenges/problems in the community for the particular issue discussed, the second meeting focused on other resources existing in the community that already were addressing the issues identified, and the third meeting focused on what approaches and strategies the particular group might take to address the issues and complement existing work. In all three cases, groups developed an action plan by the end of the third meeting—even though not surprisingly those plans changed as work moved forward.

*Developing relationships.* As was noted earlier, building sustainable partnership between university and community partners requires developing a level of trust between them that helps to bridge the gap across differences in size, scale and available resources. Based on our experiences, trust can be built on a common understanding of community needs and effective strategies to achieve goals toward community improvement. Trust can also be build upon professional and personal relationships between partners, acknowledging that there is a common understanding of identifying and utilizing effective strategies to improve conditions and outcomes for residents, organizations and institutions.

*Building trust takes time.* For us, one of the best ways to develop trust was activities like coming together for meals that contribute to creating a sense of community. Although partnerships cannot ultimately just be “about the food,” symbolic meanings tied to the sharing of food and fellowship should not be underestimated. A second important element of relationship building involves time spent in meetings and discussions sharing perspectives, establishing common interests and goals, and identifying contributions of various partners to the work-- while recognizing and publicly acknowledging that meetings need to move to action. A third is informal time outside of meetings, convening partners one-on-one or in smaller groups to go into greater depth about their personal and organizational interests and goals, and to discuss strategies for how to move forward, develop program planning, and establish approaches for addressing work issues. For us, such meetings have been simpler to organize, more convenient for our partners, better for finding out about particular needs and interests of each partner, allow for greater candor, help us to learn more about historical relationships among different partners, and provide time to develop relationships beyond what generally can happen in larger group settings. A fourth is attending meetings of partners and others in the community--being visible and involved in work that extends beyond one’s specific interests. In some instances, we attended events or worked with a community partner where no benefit (and particularly university benefit) was apparent, but would meet someone or have someone from the community see us there, and later find out that by attending we improved how we were perceived and willingness of community partners to work with us. A common element of the different experiences was that they take time; developing working relationships is central to partnership building efforts and will not happen overnight.

One final point about relationships is that university partners need to differentiate instances when they really don’t know about the direction the work needs to go and/or where partnership building and developing relationships are more important than developing the particular work that is done, from those instances in which, because of circumstances like previous commitments or funder limitations, there already are commitments to a particular approach or restrictions to particular activities. Those latter cases simply should not be represented as if the direction and work still are being decided. Based on our experiences, university partners need to avoid giving partners the impression that we would consider options beyond those already defined, for later inflexibility to pursue some suggested options may result in bad feelings due either to a sense that input was disregarded or that time was wasted making a project look like it is a full partnership when it actually is only a limited one.

*Organizing meetings.* What follows below is a summary of approaches/experiences that we have found to help in sustaining partnerships

- Engage in specific discussions within the broad topic of interest to the group in order to narrow down interests and create a focus
- Determine common goals among the broader set of specific and shared organizational interests
- Develop agreement about goals, objectives, outcomes, shared efforts and individual (organizational) contributions from each partner/organization
- Address evaluation issues, establishing process and outcome criteria early on, so measurement and documentation can take place throughout the entire project
- Develop and maintain communication and opportunities for follow up and review throughout the time of project activity
- Promptly address any issues and misunderstandings that may occur, particularly with respect to maintaining clear and effective communication
- Ensure that there are at least some outcomes that will be met as the project is nearing completion and that can be shared as success stories

- Share information about outcomes with all project partners and broadly throughout the community
- Expect projects to be dynamic and fluid in nature, which requires maintaining flexibility and tolerance for changing conditions that can alter activities of community partners or those participating in research or other partnership activities.

*Building commitment to the work.* One of our goals was to develop projects that would be viewed not as University work but as partnership work. We selected university and community co-chairs for each of the working groups in the hope that dual leadership would build stronger cooperation and shared goals, and supported them in shaping the agenda so the work was not viewed as only our project work. That actually proved challenging for us, for it put us in dual roles: (a) staffing--for we had the time to do work between meetings, and (b) organizing and guiding--for we alone had perspectives of all three groups and the desire to coordinate them where possible. We were pleased as the groups progressed that our university colleagues did not try to "take over" control of the working groups, and we tried not to do that either.

The processes that unfolded for the groups was definitely not linear, and not one for people who like predictability. Even though we tried our best to cede control to the groups and have them establish a consistent shared agenda, dynamics of the groups changed depending on who was able to attend meetings, other things going on in the community, and the complexity of balancing multiple viewpoints and goals. Groups started working in a particular direction, then paused and reconsidered, sometimes even pulling back and rethinking their direction. Eventually, they moved forward again, although often in a somewhat different direction. As has been mentioned several times, developing relationships within the groups was key, for until we reached a point where sufficient trust was established, it was difficult to move in any direction. Neither university nor community partners engaged fully until they trusted that their participation would help them fulfill their reasons for being part of the working groups. Bringing on additional partners was much simpler when different partners were able to articulate the project in consistent ways. Until there was agreement about direction and purpose, adding partners potentially slowed down the groups insofar as revisiting processes and decisions was needed. Developing and sharing written summaries of the decisions made and their justifications were an important way of increasing shared understandings of what agreements had been made and why decisions were made the way they were. But that task typically fell to us, which made it more difficult for us cede direction and control of the groups to them.

*Dynamics of power in relationships with communities.* Universities face challenges tied to their power, reputations, size, and status. They are massive in comparison to most non-government partners in community partnerships. At least some community partners expect that university people have access to substantial resources. On the University side, staff members believe they have expertise, but often don't feel particularly powerful or as having access to resources, for they don't have access to discretionary resources. University partners need to consider the balance between the position they hold and the institution they represent in how they are perceived. University salaried employees may be looked at enviously by partners who are paid hourly and attend after-hours meetings without being compensated. That perceived power difference can create complex power dynamics between urban communities and universities throughout the engagement process—even ignoring dynamics tied to preexisting relationships within communities and within universities.

We have found it important to take time to explicitly discuss the perceptions that exist among community and university partners. A major challenge for us has been to build real relationships based on accurate perceptions of what each partner has to offer in the particular setting

and circumstances, and to do what we could to ensure that each of the partners contributed something to the partnership. If community partners believe that the university has funding available, they may think that they have to follow the lead of the university in hopes of securing funding. This can create or perpetuate an unequal power dynamic between partners, and limit their candor. In contrast, for situations in which partners have an accurate understanding of the resources that are available, they are able to think more concretely about what they need to advocate for and promote as well as what they can contribute and what they need to pursue to attain their goals. Throughout the partnership, community and university partners should continue to check in with each other around expectations and work to continue to develop and strengthen honest, open relationships.

*Keeping in touch with partners.* Once specific projects began, partners with lesser interest in them not surprisingly tended to reduce their involvement in the partnerships. We used other approaches (individual meetings, developing additional projects in response to community interests, etc.). Keeping partners—both university and community—engaged is difficult, and we believe was made particularly difficult for us because of the economic downturn that squeezed resources in our and our partner organizations. Regardless of economics, one area in which we would do more if we could go back and do our work over is in the area of communications. Being better in communicating would have helped keep the work visible, which would have increased momentum and kept project efforts moving forward. If we were to start all over, we would agree in advance about the key messages that we wanted to send to the community, and work on shaping progress reports and successes and accomplishments in ways that they would reinforce those messages and help increase awareness of what the university was doing and why. Because most community residents don't have a lot of direct contact with the university, we believe that messaging needs to be consistent, fairly simple, and focused on accomplishments as well as on what is most important.

*Linking urban work to other efforts.* Inevitably, universities will have other projects and initiatives addressing issues related to if not parallel to work initiated in urban communities, but that are not specific to that community or that occur elsewhere. For example, we have an office for public engagement that supports activities of faculty and departments in areas of research, teaching, and outreach/service. And there is a center with a long history of urban engagement, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, that has developed partnerships with communities largely focused on community-identified issues. Integrating emerging work with existing work is not just sensible, it is critically important for establishing credibility in the community—if university work seems unconnected and people from various parts of the university are unaware of what their colleagues are doing, partners will be skeptical about participating, and for good reason. But it also is very difficult to coordinate work, particularly at large universities, for people from all over the university seek community partners and projects, and do so for a lot of different reasons and with a range of purposes. And in many instances the contacts are made by individuals within units without the administrative leaders in those units necessarily knowing about them (e.g., church initiated projects, or ones initiated by community partners contacting a faculty “expert” who they think might be able to help them). Among reasons for developing partnerships are: to develop internships for students, to locate settings for service learning classes, to make students more aware of parts of their own society, to illustrate issues discussed in courses, to address issues ranging from education to health to economic development, to meet NIH guidelines for representative subject populations, or to test a particular theory. Such a wide range of goals would not necessarily yield work that aligns well for collaboration even if that were desired. Nevertheless, a central goal should be to build bridges to existing work.

*Establishing time lines for work and a workplan.* As groups develop, flexibility and openness to diverse perspectives is essential, for it gives the group a sense of inclusion rather than exclusivity. At the same time, many people can focus better if they see specific things they have to do and dates by which they have to do them. They know exactly what they are expected to do and when the work needs to be completed. Also, having a time line and work plan with assignments allows group members to see the resources that have been contributed by different partners. In our groups, once the decision was made to move forward, we tried to establish specific timelines and agenda priorities so the groups could see how they were moving forward to the implementation stage of the work. Establishing timelines also exposes differences between the pace of movement of universities, who often move at a slower pace and on different time lines, than the pace of community organizations. What we learned was to work with partners at the beginning to define clear and reasonable time lines...and then try to stick to them.

*Impacts.* Key outcomes of the partnership efforts include broadening the number of community partners knowledgeable and skilled in project and partnership formation, generating resources to support the work, achieving goals and stated objectives, and developing the ability to sustain partnerships over time. A potential limiting factor in attaining success is the extent to which both community and university partners are able and willing to sustain existing efforts so that projects can reach successful outcomes. It is difficult to find programs that offer appreciable and desired benefits to all collaborative partners while helping develop new efforts or address emerging or other needs and priorities. We next directly address issues of program evaluation.

### **What approaches to program evaluation could be used to collect data and document impacts?**

*Why is evaluation important?* Program evaluation is often used to determine the value or worthiness of program activities. Evaluator Michael Quinn Patton (1978, p. 26) described evaluation as “the systematic collection of information about program activities, characteristics, and outcomes...”

- To make judgments about a program
- To improve program effectiveness
- To inform decisions about future programming”

From this perspective, evaluation assesses the effectiveness of programming to demonstrate to funders, project staff, university and community members and collaborators whether the efforts are worth the resources expended to achieve them. In this way, evaluation provides a measure of accountability to funders, project staff, and stakeholders by asking three important questions:

1. Did the project do what it said it was going to do?
2. Did the project achieve its goals?
3. What was the project’s ultimate impact on the community?

*Evaluation in community settings.* Evaluation in community settings differs in a number of ways from other evaluations. First, power and decision-making are less hierarchical in communities than in organizations. For this reason evaluations in community settings need to be more flexible to accommodate ambiguity and change, including changes in roles, influence, and involvement. Second, evaluation in community settings needs to build trust and enhance community stakeholders’ comfort with the many University stakeholders. It is important for the evaluator to do as much as possible to fully comprehend the multiple perspectives of both community and University stakeholders in the highly complex and contextualized setting of the program. (By design the FIPSE-funded work has been a meeting-rich, process-oriented



initiative.) Third, the evaluator may need to develop a close working relationship with program staff. Traditionally, the role of the evaluator has been to stand at some distance beyond the immediate activities of the program or project in order to provide an objective assessment of the program. In complex community settings with multiple projects ongoing, however, keeping distant may sacrifice awareness of the dynamics of the partnership and the changing roles of partners along with the ability to document those processes, and may lead participants to view the evaluator as an outsider rather than as a partner.

Despite differences of working in community settings, the core purposes articulated by Patton above will hold across settings. While evaluation objectives vary greatly depending on the specific goals of the program or project, the overall intent of evaluation is to provide useful information to the stakeholders, including the funders, program staff, and community members.

To illustrate, over the three-year grant period, many of the evaluation efforts were formative, which is to say the information was intended to provide project staff and their community partners with information to make adjustments and mid-course corrections. Evaluation activities monitored the development of the urban outreach center, followed the work of the three working groups, and assessed the changes in perceptions among university and community members and whether those perceptions changed over time. The evaluation identified those elements that moved the partnership forward as well as the obstacles that impeded progress. In tracking the change process, the evaluation focused on three areas:

1. how the project is creating long-term, sustainable community/University relationships mindful of the resources, preferences, and needs of the Northside community;
2. how the project addresses key issues arising from the community while staying true to the land grant and civic missions of public institutions of higher education, and to the strategic goals of the University; and,
3. how to document the efficacy of developing the physical location on the Northside to which the collaborative research and outreach programs are relocated.

The evaluation also had summative elements. One important task was to gauge broader community attitudes about the University and its presence. We embedded questions in a community attitudes survey that is administered to Minnesotans annually by the University Relations office. Baseline data from that survey were collected beginning in November 2007, and is currently in its fifth year, providing data about Northside residents' attitudes both before (two years) and after (the most recent three years) the opening of the UROC building. These analyses not only provide information about resident perceptions of the impacts of the new center, but also provide comparisons of North Minneapolis respondents with the statewide sample of Minnesotans.

### **What have we learned about building and sustaining engagement across time?**

*Lessons learned.* As a way to integrate the preceding sections of this guide, we summarize some of the lessons that we have learned through our work about our roles and our views of partnerships (this work draws from and expands on earlier, less complete lists from Maruyama, Jones, & Finnegan, 2009, and several conference presentations). Elaboration about the lessons appears in the larger version of the guide.

1. It is not enough to be raising money to invest in urban communities; community members want to see tangible impacts of the money in the community.
2. Tied to #1 is that in challenged communities, there is much less true volunteer (donated) labor available.
3. Trust needs to be earned.

4. It is very important to be able to track indirect impacts of projects.
5. Flexibility is essential.
6. Expect challenges when trying to engage practitioners and policy makers simultaneously.
7. If there are clear directions that one wants to pursue, it probably is not wise to present the situation as if all possibilities are equally viable.
8. Pre-existing relations—be they good or poor, will strongly shape the work.
9. Expect participation not only from allies but also from critics.
10. Virtually all parties, university and community, come to the table with their own goals and agendas, and they will promote those.
11. Large universities have to deal with perceptions about them as powerful and controlling.
12. We learn a lot about ourselves.
13. Expectations of university and community partners need to be managed. Setting modest and achievable goals is a way to build realistic expectations.
14. People come with different views about what research is.
15. One of the unique opportunities for universities is that they have both credibility and an absence of self-interest in convening community and civic partners to develop new, unique partnerships that can drive community change.
16. Assumptions universities make about external communities should be regularly revisited.
17. Universities need to be clear about the resources that they have available and how those resources will be used.
18. Universities need to take time to meet with key community organizations to explain the university's interests.
19. Universities need to be ready to provide support and technical assistance to make efforts successful.
20. Universities need to determine the capacity of initial partners (university as well as community) to set and achieve goals and outcomes as partnerships are formed and develop. As has been noted earlier, some of those who come early to partnership meetings are individuals with interest but with very limited capacity.
21. Universities need to develop an infrastructure of support for faculty members interested in engaging in urban partnership work.
22. Communication about what is happening and how it is working is critical to success.
23. Expend effort in advance to define what success will be, so you know it when you experience it and can celebrate it.
24. Work in challenged communities is complicated by large numbers of small non-profits.
25. Many times universities won't be leading the process—but to stay engaged in meaningful ways, they should be sure to remain engaged in the process throughout so they understand what is going on.
26. Whenever reasonable, set clear expectations for partners and get partnership agreements in writing.
27. True engagement takes time, and patience and persistence are required to build strong relationships.

*Remaining challenges.* Beyond what we have learned, challenges remain. First is a systems issue. Researchers need better networks to share their knowledge. We know that much is being done to address urban challenges. Because the work crosses so many disciplines and is so widespread, disconnected, and fragmented, however, it is difficult to know about other work going on in peer institutions. To make real progress, better sharing of information within higher education is needed.

Second is better connecting work with other work across our institution. It was difficult to create and sustain broad engagement. Even though many of our colleagues are used to collaboration,

their collaborations are not of the scope and scale that are optimal for addressing complex issues, which makes the work particularly challenging. For example, connecting with offices, colleges, and departments as well as faculty is needed. Many of the needed partners come from different budgetary units, which makes anything related to resources more challenging.

Third, a particularly challenging issue for us was how to address demographic issues in our conversations with partners. For example, when do we talk about race in partnerships, and how do we talk about it?

Fourth, attracting funding in a timely manner to keep momentum of the work has been another major challenge. Only in one area, healthy foods, have we been able to attract resources to build community capacity and bolster work of partners.

Fifth, engaging university faculty, staff, and students in the work is hard. If there is serious commitment to engaged work, university reward systems need to recognize differences in doing engaged work, and to encourage and support such work. Institutional reward structures need to be reviewed so that they do not punish those who do such work. They also need to recognize that most faculty do not receive training in such work, so professional development needs to be coupled with support. That development could be provided by community members as well as faculty and staff.

Finally, effectively communicating with the community has been a major challenge for us. Initially it was our being focused on other issues that created the challenge. Even when we realized the importance of better communication, our work was made cumbersome by its need to be embedded in broader university messages about all the engaged work led by communications staff. Our work moved at their schedule, not ours. Based on these experiences, it would be good to plan funds for communications.

*Our project findings.* Our partnership work largely was guided by priorities set by partnership groups and shaped by our community partners in each of the three focus areas. It progressed nicely during the second and third years of the project. That stands in marked contrast with the first year, which despite our best intentions to get specific projects started, became primarily a time to establish trust and demonstrate that concerns about us taking control rather than partnering were unfounded and that we were committed to jointly determined partnerships. Simply, partners presented a number of different reasons that prevented projects from starting, but in *none* of three groups did substantial partnership work start until the second year of the project. Over time, membership in the guiding/oversight groups has grown, with groups ranging from about 25 to about 60 members including university and community members. Although attendance at oversight group meetings has been variable, interest of partners in staying informed about the work has been very strong.

One characteristic of the work is that efforts and roles change over time. The youth entrepreneurship group initially developed a curriculum to use with youth and piloted it with a couple small groups of youth. But we found our partners continuing to offer their own entrepreneurship programs, so we have switched our focus to work with them to develop program evaluation tools that they could use and to help broker relationships across our partners, rather than duplicating existing efforts. And we brought together and supported other University programs that offered youth entrepreneurship programming, integrating and aligning existing work. One tangible outcome of one of our programs was youth from a community high school opening and running a “school spirit” store in their high school, selling school memorabilia. Another was a participant in the 2010 program started his own community garden

summer 2011 as an entrepreneurial activity. And for us, focusing on support and evaluation allowed us to initiate conversations among our partner programs about using common instruments to assess outcomes. There was pretty good acceptance by partners for a common set of items as long as we helped them individually develop items specific to their program. To date, the small numbers of participants of the programs have limited the extent to which it has been worthwhile to try to pool data across programs to determine impact at a broader community level.

The three (four) groups focused both on immediate actions to develop the partnership and to try out particular partnership activities, and on longer-term, larger scale actions that would help create and sustain broader community level change. In each area we have established smaller working groups of people with direct interests in the particular activities, and have changed the role of the larger working groups to oversight. The larger groups met quarterly to receive updates, to provide feedback to us about the progress and direction of the work, and to help us think about additional related issues to explore and/or areas in which to plan collaborative action that could be developed in the near future.

For example, in the area of Human Development, a group of out of school time service providers (the Northside Out of School Time network, or NOST) came together in response to our convening of partners and our initial plan to canvass two areas within the community to see which summer programs the youth were using. They wanted to improve accessibility and availability of information about summer and other out of school programs that goes out to parents, but recognized the importance of starting first to improve their skills and to assess overall capacity to serve the needs of community youth. They noted that most youth workers receive little ongoing professional development, and jobs often are not set up to create career paths. They worked with us to create a professional community of providers that shares best practices and offers opportunities for professional development for youth workers (provided by the University, which potentially gives us opportunities to attract entry level youth workers from diverse backgrounds to teaching or youth work careers), including hourly workers. We helped them conduct a survey of providers to create a directory of programs, with a goal of developing a mapping of what is provided and where gaps are in services. As the group aligned its work with the Northside Achievement Zone (a local adaptation of the Harlem Children's Zone of Geoffrey Canada and colleagues), the focus turned back to youth, which limited the extent to which professional development of youth workers was a high priority. (our larger guide includes a timeline of activities of that group). That work will definitely be sustained, for NAZ just received a Promise Neighborhood implementation grant that will support the work for the next five years. And the focus is turning back to providers, for they are implementing empirically supported effective practices across the programs.

As we continued our involvement with the NAZ out-of-school time group, we also went back to key partners who had been less involved with the particular project to see what they still saw as of interest and importance. In response to interest they expressed, we convened a group including the public school district and the city and county to re-envision summer school so that it better serves the needs of youth and families and so it offers enriching educational experiences during the entire summer. That group built some partnerships that started summer 2011 (e.g., the UM "Kids on Campus" for the first time offered MPS summer school classes on our campus), but other efforts were undermined by a tornado that ravaged parts of the community in May. A goal still is to develop more integrated services across agencies (city recreation centers, summer school programming including ALC programming, private providers, public institutions of higher education, faith community organizations, and others) for future summers.

A major challenge in partnership development was that partners expected us to have funds to do everything that we really wanted to do. And in some instances, they seemed to hold back to see just how much we would invest in partnership activities. One issue raised several times that seemed reasonable to us was a concern that we would compete with the community for resources, and might limit what was available to them. In part as a response to that concern, the University committed \$50,000 per year to a small grants program that would fund community-initiated partnership projects. Admittedly, those funds serve mostly to help create new partnerships, build modest capacity, and bring limited university resources to bear on community needs, but they also had symbolic as well as practical value, illustrating our recognition of the importance of our partnerships increasing resources available to communities and of supporting partners. We also helped partners to seek external support and worked with them to attract funding for the collaborative work. We created partnerships with community partners as lead agencies to pursue additional opportunities for support, and received external support for work on healthy foods (from Blue Cross/Blue Shield) headed by a community health center. We also received a small grant supporting schoolyard gardening (from General Mills Foundation) in which most of the resources went to buy supplies, tools, and plants for the school sites.

Although the work touches all parts of the university, including major foci on health and ongoing work done by UM Extension, the College of Education and Human Development and its teacher education programs also have central roles to play in urban partnerships, for reducing disparities among youth in areas of educational achievement and attainment, nutrition, and health are key content areas for the partnership-building work described. Particularly in the current information age where education is key for career success (e.g., Achieve, 2004; Duderstadt, 2000), long term solutions to urban problems can come only from changing the educational trajectories of youth so they have a chance to compete for high skill jobs. And schools provide a place where there are opportunities to make connections with all children and their lives.

Further illustrating the importance of educational programming and involvement of faculty familiar with K-12 education, even projects that don't appear to be primarily about academic skills may fail unless they ensure that participating students have adequate academic skills. Our work in youth entrepreneurship programming illustrates the adverse impacts that lack of basic skills can create in limiting youth even in areas where they have great interest and potentially some skills. The initial entrepreneurship curricula did not work well, for many of the youth lacked other skills that they would need, most notably academic and social ones. So the programming needed to be changed to add skill development as preparatory to and integrated with the entrepreneurship work, with that program becoming as much an educational enrichment (and in some cases remediation) program as a entrepreneurship program. An interesting aspect of the entrepreneurship work is that it largely is community development, engaging young people in efforts to develop and enhance the economic fabric of the community. Developing these skills is particularly important in communities like the one in which we are working, for the business community is limited. Compared with more affluent communities, there are fewer stable or enduring small businesses or service providers.

The public schools have been strong partners, staying well-represented in the different projects and working with us to engage multiple community partners. Even in cases where the programming was done outside of the schools, the district has explored ways of offering variants of the programs within the schools, for example, through community education programs or through the extended day/extended year programming. They have held some of

their district summer school offerings on college campuses, increasing access to urban students for teacher education students and allowing for limited opportunities for research. And, for the school district, off-site summer programming allows their students to get exposure to life on a college campus and gets them thinking about attending college, and it also allows them to work on their facilities all summer long.

Throughout the projects we have tracked the processes and participants as the partnerships developed. The work also included some behavioral measures (e.g., number of youth from the community attending the University, number of faculty involved) as well as community perceptions about the university and its impacts on the community. Because the facility has been open only since October 2009, these data are still preliminary. But we have data on both admissions to the University as well as on community attitudes. With respect to college admissions, we have data over four years starting in 2007. During that time, the numbers of high school graduates from the North Minneapolis area's public schools was falling, which made analysis more complicated. Reporting in percentages, the high school closest to our facility had new freshman enrollments that ranged between 9 and 15% of the total number of graduates enroll at the University of Minnesota. Respectively, the percentages from 2007 to 2010 were 13 and 9 in the two years before UROC opened, and 15% each of the two most recent years. The other North Minneapolis high school maintained a fairly stable size of its graduating class, and enrolled graduates whose numbers represented 15 and 12 percent of their graduating class in 2007 and 2008, and 13 and 11 percent in 2009 and 2010. Those rates of enrollment are in general comparable with other Minneapolis high schools.

With respect to general community attitudes, for four successive years we have collected a brief survey of community residents, asking them what they knew about the University's presence in the community and how it was affecting the community and them personally. The survey was done by our University Relations office as part of a statewide survey of Minnesota residents, and we added an oversampling of the community. During the first two years of data collection, our community presence was still limited, for the UROC center had not yet opened, so our visibility was still much lower than it is currently, and a majority of respondents reported not knowing about impacts of the U's work in the community. For year 3 data collection, the center had just opened that fall. In years 3 and 4 of the survey, we found a marked increase in the proportion of respondents who knew about the UROC from less than 25% across the two pre-opening years to over 50% in the two years following opening of UROC, and overall community attitudes of North Minneapolis respondents about the University are now more positive than those of a statewide sample of Minnesotans.

In addition to community surveys, the external evaluator and some of the research assistants have been interviewing our partners and key university contacts to gather more detailed information about their perceptions about our successes and challenges. and to better understand how the partnership work is perceived by them. Based on 29 interviews, four themes emerged as key for partnerships:

*Convene & Connect* Using influence of University to convene and connect people. People will come to meetings called by the University.

*Communicate*. Keeping partners informed about what is happening, how they can be involved, and what their commitments need to be.

*Timeline & Sustainability*. Setting timelines and goals for projects and working to assure sustainability. As a note about goals, caution should be exercised to restrain expectations, for some partners expect immediate major impacts.

*Roles & Relationships*. Building effective partnerships and defining roles and commitments of all the partners to the work.

A complement to the themes that emerged is the importance of how the work is framed. We have stressed at our community meetings that our work is part of an institutional, long-term commitment to partnership. We are building partnerships, and any one project is part of the larger set of inter-related projects that will affect the community, and particularly the youth within it. If the work turns out to be only a number of small, faculty-initiated projects of limited duration, community buy-in will be minimal, and may leave community members feeling used regardless of the intentions of the university partners.

So, one might ask, has the university been successful in its urban work? It probably is too soon to make that judgment, for sustainability is probably most important, as is broader engagement of the University of Minnesota community and the North Minneapolis community, not to mention positive outcomes that address the issues identified for partnership. But things are looking increasingly promising. The lack of substantial progress toward eliminating the achievement gap that has been found repeatedly in work all across the U.S. suggests that new approaches are needed, and we believe that integrating university projects with the array of efforts ongoing within a community in long-term collaboration offers the best prospects for making an impact. As a starting point for judging effectiveness of our work, we certainly can point to increased engagement, successes in attracting external funds to support work being done in the community, and new and broader partnerships between the University and the North Minneapolis community. Most importantly, the partnership work is expanding. During December, 2011, the Twin Cities community received three multi-year, multi-million dollar federal grants: a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, a Promise Neighborhood Implementation Grant, and an Investing in Innovation grant. The Promise Neighborhood grant is focused exclusively in North Minneapolis, while the other two have portions of the work there. And we can point to increased community awareness of UROC and very positive views about the University generally and in its impacts on the community. As these and other projects ramp up, they build upon substantial start-up periods that have built trust and established working relationships, so the hopes and expectations are that ultimately positive changes will occur.

### **Serendipity: Dealing with Unexpected Community and Economic Challenges**

For this project, among the strongest shapers of partnership development were changes due to economic conditions and unexpected events over which we had no control. The take away message from our experiences is simple: “expect the unexpected,” for crazy things that affect partnership work can and do happen. Perhaps we experienced more of those than some other projects done at different times might, for during the project a substantial economic downturn occurred. Of all the things that happened, the most visible event was one that could only be viewed as a random event, namely, a recent (May 2011) tornado that moved through North Minneapolis. That transformed our efforts for summer 2011, at least in the short term, to ones that support the community as it cleaned up and recovered from the disaster. It also resulted in additional needs within the community and changed the focus of most of our partners from an orderly planning of events for the summer to scrambling to address immediate and powerful needs within the community. Not surprisingly, impacts of the tornado persisted throughout the summer. Fortunately, we were able to move ahead on a couple partnership projects, one bringing MPS students to the UM campus for summer school, the second continuing development of the healthy eating and schoolyard gardening work.

Even though the tornado is a powerful example of events that we cannot control, the previous summer we experienced equally impactful events on our schoolyard gardening work. The three Minneapolis Public Schools that were our partners in the gardening work we had been

developing were all designated for restructuring under No Child Left Behind. Under the required restructuring, the one given/constant across the various options that districts might choose was that the principal cannot stay, but needs to be reassigned from the building. Insofar as our relationships were built, as is common for school-based partnerships, through the principals, that requirement totally undermined relationships we had been building for two years. Even though central office staff were supportive, their message always was, “We support you, but you need to work through the principal.” for the district was using site-based management. And the new principals were brought in with an explicit directive to address achievement gaps in reading, writing, and mathematics. So sustaining our work in schoolyard gardening/science was a tough sell, particularly with principals given specific directives to decrease achievement gaps and increase achievement in reading, writing, and math. In addition, they were new to their buildings, didn’t know the buildings or the staff well, and didn’t know who we were or have any context for our work or understand our intentions and motivations. Adding to our challenges, in one case the science teacher with whom we had partnered (for two years) followed her principal to a different school, which took away all experience we had within the school. And because the district was not certain about what they wanted to do with one school (close it, convert it to a charter school, or leave it, with a stronger likelihood of one of the first two options), it was difficult to determine how to work with that school. Finally, at that same school site, the local neighborhood organization that had been working in partnership with the school on the gardens decided to start a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group, and used all the available garden beds that had been developed. As a result, we didn’t get much work going at that site, and eventually moved to a different site the following year.

Another example of a change that we had not anticipated was moving the physical location of a school. One partner school had no existing garden, so we did most of the work in 2009 to establish one, bringing in compost and soil, tilling a large part of the land behind the school—over 200 linear feet of garden, and working with the school to plant vegetables. About mid-summer we were informed that the school was outgrowing its existing site and would be moving the upcoming fall to a different site about five blocks north of the existing site. So we gave up the garden we had worked so hard to develop, and moved with them. We went through a process of creating a garden again the following year at the new site. Currently, we no longer have any relation with the old site, and have no idea if it is being used for gardening.

Yet an additional important external change is that across the three and a half years of the project we have lost a number of key partners. Although we anticipated some turnover, during the period of funding, 2008-2011, community capacity changed substantially as a result of the economic slowdown and responses of funding agencies supporting community agencies to that slowdown. Because of the economic slowdown and the major drop in the stock market in 2008, those providing support of non-profits in North Minneapolis reduced their levels of support and asked for greater coherence and integration in grant requests, looking for requests from collaborative partnerships with capacity to make a difference. They have been less likely to support independent or ad hoc types of requests from small organizations. A challenge to the modified approach from our perspective is that most of our partner organizations were started to address what they saw as a gap in available programming or services, and the needs that they identified in many instances still remain largely unmet. Although we also might hope that by forcing collaboration and greater coherence across programs, needs will be more effectively addressed and beneficial practices will be taken to scale more quickly, at this time it is not clear whether that will happen, and we have seen a number of community agencies close due to lack of funding. Whether their elimination reflects a weaning of inefficient and ineffective organizations from external support or reduces programs effectively serving needs remains to be seen.



Without naming our partners who no longer exist, they include:

- a non-profit focused on expanding farmers' markets, increasing effectiveness of distribution of healthy foods within the community, and improved understanding of community residents including youth about opportunities for local food production through backyard, schoolyard, or community gardens;
- a non-profit providing after school programming for youth, particularly tied to robotics and music production; and
- a non-profit providing a large array of youth services including alternative schools and after-school and summer programs that include meals.

A number of other non-profit partners have substantially reduced their services. Most have cut back in some ways, reflecting the economic slowdown, but others have taken larger cuts, including:

- a non-profit providing support and technical assistance for a number of agencies within the community;
- a non-profit providing an array of youth after school and summer programs,
- a non-profit helping people with mobility problems attain access to healthy meals,
- a non-profit providing a wide range of services and support to the community,
- a neighborhood association serving communities around our UROC facility, and
- a non-profit providing businesses with technical assistance.

Of the greatest impacts on our project is that the two sites where we started pilot work on entrepreneurship and out-of-school time programming have experienced substantial changes. One is closed, the other laid off the individual who was our partner. That surprised us, for he had been effective in his capacity to work with youth. And, as was explained above, for the schoolyard gardening work, two of our original school sites are no longer active partners with us due to changes in staffing.

An important aspect of recent funding decisions and patterns is that organizations that cannot document their effectiveness are less likely to garner additional support, even if they may be effective. Our concern about helping organizations document their effectiveness has led us to focus some of our work on providing evaluation services and support to community partners. In some instances, we have helped design evaluations, in others provided instruments partners can use for evaluation, and in others have provided critiques of and suggestions about how they might improve their current evaluation efforts. One direction of our evaluation support has been toward establishing common instruments across programs as much as possible so that we could look across programs at collective impact within communities. To do that, we attempted to develop instruments that were customizable but that also contained common elements that would be appropriate for many programs and whose data could be combined to assess collective impact. Using such instruments would not only help programs talk about their collective impact, it would position them for collaborative proposals that seek external funding, for they would already have common metrics in place to evaluate their programs. To date, however, we have not been highly successful in getting common instruments in place, and in those instances where instruments cross programs, have not seen enough data to assess collective impacts.

In addition to organizational changes, there has been substantial staff turnover among many of our partners. Leadership at two nearby large community organizations has changed during the course of the project, with mixed effects on our partnership. The school superintendent has changed twice, and the area superintendent over North Minneapolis has changed four times.

A partner in grant collaboration has had leadership of its grants group change. And the primary contact for our MPS out-of-school time work left that position when it was eliminated. Within our partner organizations, community leaders of two of our three working groups have changed jobs. In one area, our community co-chair has changed twice. In all three areas our current community co-chair has changed; the one where there still is continuity had two individuals working together as co-chairs, and one still is in the same position and still helps with that effort. And, because job changes have been dramatic, we didn't even try to track our partners (listed in an appendix) across the various organizations in which they have worked; the appendix lists the affiliation they had when they worked with us. The important message here is the same as was stated earlier, expect changes in staffing and remain flexible, for many factors lead people to change jobs, particularly in difficult economic times. And those changes affect our work in the community.

In summary, if our experiences are representative of what others are experiencing, universities trying to establish long-term relationships within communities need to anticipate and be flexible in responding to ongoing change and stay ready to react to changes. Even if our experiences have been exacerbated by the economic downturn, those events likely primarily amplify challenges that occur regularly in good times as well as challenging ones. We believe that one important aspect of the challenge of developing sustainable partnerships is that relationships need to be institutionalized. Even if there is a strong, charismatic individual working with the university as a partner, university partners need to ensure that the commitment is organizational, not individual, and to encourage the partner to develop the partnership in a way that it will be sustainable even if the key organizational contact were to leave.

Finally, in closing this section, it is important to note that even though our key project staff remained unchanged, an analysis of university turnover shows substantial changes there as well. We have just experienced a presidential transition on July 1, 2011, which may create substantial change in our urban engagement (that still is not known, although the president has articulated support for the urban engagement work). It also eventually may change a set of upper level administrators responsible for oversight and support of the work. As the UROC work began, the University had a transitional oversight group with senior administrators as leaders in five areas. Even though the group no longer is responsible for oversight, of those, a dean and a vice president are gone, and another vice president is planning on retiring soon, leaving only two of the five still here to remember and support the work. And insofar as the University's level of support from the State of Minnesota has been cut substantially and its number of administrators is being reduced, we could also appear on a list of partners whose level of commitment to partnership work is diminished even though the work largely has been protected from cuts.

*Reflection: There Are Two Sides to the Mirror.* As we have reflected on our partnerships and how they have developed, we inevitably have learned a lot about working to develop partnerships. Much of that learning is presented in "lessons learned." But an important part of what we have learned involves turning the focus to ourselves, and reflecting on what partnership building has helped us learn about ourselves, our expectations, and our culture. Perhaps most important is recognizing that the academic culture from which we come is pretty unique, has its own ways of doing things, and that those ways often are very different from the ways that other organizations operate. What we realize about differences may seem fairly simple, for example, acknowledging that hiring family members (nepotism) may be a way of life for small organizations that need to have employees that the leadership can trust and who will be loyal. But they can have consequences and create conflicts when large organizations with rules against nepotism clash with small ones where employment is much different. Examples

like this one remind us that we should not take things for granted, that we need to articulate what we do and why we do the things that we do, and to find out what others do and why they do those things as well.

*But the challenges go deeper.* Even if academics are attentive to the culture of our partners and try to change their behaviors for those instances when they are “outsiders” to the culture, for example, when they attend meetings of partners, many of the meetings that occur as urban and other partnerships develop are ones that academics host or that include a balance of academics and community partners. In those instances, the appropriate culture is less clear, and we academics may unconsciously bring with us our culture to define how we do things. Meeting at a university site—even one within the community, for example, may elicit particular patterns of behavior and/or expectations about how to behave. And that may hinder development of partnerships or delay the development until the culture issues are addressed or those not comfortable with the culture stop attending the meetings. For example, those of us who have been academics all our careers likely have developed ways of doing things from the academy that we may unconsciously adopt in our community work: checking academic credentials of people at the meeting, expecting that research and evidence will be treated as more important than personal experience in suggesting what is correct or how to move forward, assuming that people will “chime in” with their views, challenging competing perspectives to support their positions with evidence, speaking in “lecture” mode and trying to teach others during meetings, displaying verbal skills that can dominate conversations, and even enjoying meetings in which very different perspectives are pitted one against another. And we may bring with us expectations that we are experts and should be treated as such.

To be clear, we are not saying that all academics do such things or that it necessarily is bad or non-productive in mixed group settings, for it may be neither. And researchers who adopt particular orientations to community partnership like action research would suggest that their approach, which recognizes community capacity, avoids such problems. But we are saying that if the style that is dominant in particular meetings and/or groups is bothersome to potential partners and we are not aware of that, progress can be slowed down and/or potential partners lost. Even if partners appreciate our capacity to invoke research and critique assertions, they may not find meetings as enriching as they felt like they would if they had more opportunities to speak and if there were less conflict and disagreement, for not all partners view conflicts positively. The point is that ideally part of the process promotes self-reflection and feedback from partners about us, our institution, and our approaches as well as about them and their approaches.

*Local vs. Generalizable Knowledge.* As this project began, we talked with colleagues at other institutions to see how they were addressing the issues that we were tackling. Some of what we learned has already been presented in earlier sections. But we also realized that there are some elements of partnership that are unique to different settings, and so a challenge that we faced is determining what is likely to be common across settings and what is likely to be unique, idiosyncratic, or highly variable. The fact that we had four different projects helped us identify commonalities and uniquenesses in our experiences, and we have tried to talk about commonalities where they emerged. But insofar as all the work involved only a single community and single institution, we could not disentangle things as completely as we would have liked, so our lessons learned may be in some instances not applicable to other settings and institutions. As our project moved toward its end and we had data to share, we have engaged partners and are seeking support for multi-site work that would allow us to build beyond learnings from our single site.

*Sustaining engagement.* Finally, the trillion dollar question is whether or not urban community-university partnerships can be sustained across time, can build local capacity so university partners can transition out to address new, emerging issues, can seamlessly move from project to project within areas of partnership to keep addressing important issues as they emerge and sustain the partnerships as viable, and can actually make meaningful progress in addressing important community issues. As we look back at our work, we know that in each area where we have worked, projects are continuing. How well they will continue without the “backbone” support that FIPSE funding provided is not clear, particularly when current research is arguing that it takes longer than 3-4 years to create broad, cross-sector partnerships (Kania & Kramer, 2011). But we are hopeful, and will continue to seek funding so that the work can continue. And the major grants described earlier in part were successful because of the University’s commitments to urban engagement and partnership building, so the future will at the very least be very interesting, and should show some very positive community level outcomes.

A final irony of circumstances beyond our control is that we have begun to build a network of university partners across the country, and sought “backbone” support to convene them over three years to develop a guide informed by a diverse set of institutional experiences. It would identify what all the institutions and their community partners saw as key issues to address, and build and validate both measurement structures and approaches for effective urban engagement. Its goals were to produce a summary of effective and creative approaches for developing engagement models, a guide of effective practices built from our work and that of our colleagues, and trainings for partner and other institutions on why and how to develop engagements that address fundamental challenges facing post-secondary education today and how to engage graduate and undergraduate students in the process and actions. But our collaborative efforts were delayed by reduction in federal government budgets, which led to a cancellation of the 2011 FIPSE competition, which was where we were first going to submit the proposal.

## References

- Achieve (2004). *Ready or not: Creating a high school diploma that counts*. The American Diploma Project. Downloaded October 20, 2010, from [http://www.achieve.org/files/ADPreport\\_7.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/ADPreport_7.pdf).
- Bok, D. (1990). *Universities and the future of America*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professorate*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Checkoway, B. (2001). Renewing the mission of the American research university. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(2), 127-147.
- Duderstadt, J. J. (2000). *A university for the 21st century*. Ann Arbor, MI.: University of Michigan Press.
- Gibson, C. (2007). *New Times Demand New Scholarship: Research Universities and Civic Engagement* Tufts University, <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/downloads/NewTimesNewScholar.pdf>.
- Holland, B. A., & Gelmon, S. B. (1998). The state of the “engaged campus”: What have we learned about building and sustaining university-community partnerships? *AAHE Bulletin*, 51(2), 3-6.
- Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, , Winter, 36-41.
- Katz, B. (2007). *A Nation in Transition: What the Urban Age Means for the United States*. Paper presented at the Urban Age Conference, New York, New York, May 3.

Katz, B., Altman, A., & Wagner, J. (2006). *An urban agenda for an urban age*. Paper presented at Urban Age Conference, Berlin, November.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W.F. IV (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97 (1), Fall, 47-68.

Lewin, K. (1948). Action research and minority problems. In K. Lewin, *Resolving social problems*. (New York: Harper & Brothers), 201-216.

Maruyama, G., Jones, R. J., & Finnegan, J. R. (2009). Advancing an urban agenda: Principles and experiences of an urban land grant University. *Metropolitan Universities*, 20 (1), 75-100.

McTaggart, R. (1991). Principles for participatory action research. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41(3), 168-187.

McTaggart, R (1997). *Participatory action research international contexts and consequences*. Albany : State University of New York Press.

Patton, M. Q. (1978). *Utilization-focused evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.

Percy, S. L., Zimpher, N. L., & Brukardt, M. J.. (2006). *Creating a new kind of university*. Bolton, MA.: Anker Publishing.

Porter, M. E. (1998). *On Competition*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Business School.

Schon, D. A. (1995). Knowing-in-action: The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. *Change*, (November/December). 27-34.

Weiwel, W., & Perry.D. (2008). *Global universities and urban development: Case studies and analysis*. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe.

Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. London: Bloomsbury.