Thomas M. Scott

Research and outreach on urban issues were "new business" for higher education thirty years ago. Since then many models have been developed for incorporating an urban emphasis into university structures and functions. At the University of Minnesota, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) was established as an all-university unit with resources to establish community connections, facilitate and support faculty and graduate student urban research and outreach, and help integrate urban concerns into a large, urban-located land grant university.

Urban Affairs at a Land Grant and Research University

In the late 1960s the University of Minnesota, like many other universities and colleges across the country, faced considerable pressure from students, faculties, and communities to respond to the urban crisis that (along with the war in Asia) had left the nation in social and political turmoil. Consistent with the university's land grant mission to serve the people of the state, the administration and Board of Regents of the university created a Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), in the fall of 1966. Now, thirty years later, urban and urban-related issues are back on the public agenda and, once again, universities and centers such as CURA are being asked to get involved.

Several important concepts were incorporated in CURA's establishment. First, with remarkable understanding and prescience, the university's president made it clear in the initial discussions that a "...regional perspective was required—one could not draw a line between urban and non-urban." Second, an interdisciplinary approach would also be needed: "...even as urban and regional covers rural affairs too, it reaches into most of the academic disciplines to which the university is devoted." Finally, the founders also seemed to understand that controversy was not unlikely: "the university cannot remain an ivory tower...the risks that a public university takes in helping to resolve sometimes sensitive issues is worth it and, indeed, necessary" (*Minneapolis Tribune*, 1966).

CURA's basic mission was established in those early days and has remained stable since: get the resources of the university—its faculty and students—involved with working on the problems facing the people and communities of Minnesota. Ironically, this mission does not

differ significantly from an important part of the mission of all land grant institutions where, traditionally, the focus has been on agriculture and rural issues. The establishment of CURA, in effect, created a separate institutional means for carrying out the land grant mission with an additional focus on urban issues. Subsequently, our work has tended to cover a broad range of such issues: housing, relations among racial and ethnic groups, transportation, environment and energy, social services, and improved information resources (including land use and demographics). More recent emphases include urban and regional growth, community economic development and employment, and neighborhood revitalization.

Much of what CURA is (its operating philosophy) and what CURA does (its programs and projects) are a consequence of the combination of the characteristics of the University of Minnesota and its urban setting. The university combines in one institution and largely in one location a preeminent research and graduate training institution; a land grant university with agricultural and natural resource research, instruction, and extension; a full range of professional degree programs, including a medical school, hospital, and law school; and a largely Minnesota-based undergraduate student body. And the main Twin Cities campus is located in the heart of the sixteenth largest metropolitan region in the country, including more than half of the state's population and its capital.

Such a comprehensive university has always had faculty actively engaged in projects in the community, whether in the Colleges of Education or Agriculture or the Schools of Public Health Management, through the Extension Service, or elsewhere. Indeed, throughout the state and in its communities there are countless groups and agencies actively engaged in public issues, and CURA's style and functions have necessarily been shaped by these circumstances.

Operating Philosophy

First, most CURA projects are experimental, pilot, or short-term; it tries to avoid managing long-term projects and programs. If projects are unsuccessful, they are concluded. If they are successful over the longer term, CURA helps transfer them (spin them off) to appropriate administrative locations in (and sometimes outside) the university, where they can be managed on a permanent basis. This strategy is perhaps most appropriate in a large, complex university where short-term experimental responses are sometimes difficult to achieve.

Second, CURA has no direct instructional role. This helps keep the mission and role simpler, and, in a comprehensive university, there are many other departments available to carry out instructional programs, e.g. the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs (a college), with masters' degree programs in Public Policy and in Planning, and an undergraduate degree program in urban studies in the College of Liberal Arts. However, because we make extensive use of graduate research assistants and interns from programs across the university in most of our projects, we contribute indirectly to the educational experiences of those students.

Third, CURA makes as much use as possible of university faculty in its programs and projects, usually on an ad hoc basis. Most faculty members, especially the strongest ones, will not commit to community-oriented research activities on a long-term basis. Because we do not have our own faculty "stable," new projects often require that we identify and persuade already busy faculty to work with us. Occasionally we

lease part of a faculty member's time from the home department on a longer-term basis, especially if external grants and contracts are involved. The continual process of involving different faculty in CURA projects is especially important in the research university setting because it keeps us more fully connected with the central work of the institution.

Fourth, CURA is an all-university unit. We can draw on the rich diversity of talent and actively work with faculty and students from all corners of the institution.

Fifth, CURA avoids competing with other agencies or organizations inside or outside the university. The university, the state, and the state's communities have many able policy-oriented agencies, organizations, programs, and people. Rather than compete, we try to cooperate where we can and fill niches when appropriate to our resources and capabilities.

Finally, CURA works at the intersection of the university's research and outreach missions. While the university's organizational structure does not easily accommodate such a unit, we have retained our all-university "franchise" and continue to report to the academic and research sides of the university's administrative structure that have been important in maintaining our institutional visibility and credibility.

Programs and Projects

Similarly, what CURA does is also shaped by the nature of the university and the community. Our approach is eclectic, pragmatic, and often opportunistic. We receive proposals for projects from the community, faculty, students, and other university units, and we generate ideas of our own. We support proposals that address important issues with promise of success, and we reject those that are not as central to our mission. We solicit project ideas from faculty and community agencies and organizations on a competitive basis, and we also choose from among unsolicited proposals. And we carry out projects of our own initiative.

Project Solicitation/Competition

CURA solicits and chooses from among competing proposals in several different ways. One of the most important is the annual faculty research competition, in which all university faculty members are invited to submit proposals for "interactive research" grants. Proposed projects must deal with a significant issue of public policy for the state or its communities and must include active interaction with interested groups, agencies, or organizations. If all goes well, these interactive research projects will result in a product of use to those dealing with the issue, a more general discussion for our publication and distribution, and one or more articles for professional journals. Selected projects provide some salary support for the faculty member and a half-time graduate research assistant for twelve months. Topics of recently supported projects include psychological factors affecting the transition from welfare to work (School of Management); managing continuous traffic flow data (Computer Science); the state's local government aid formulas (Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs); and the interaction of surface and ground water (Civil Engineering).

A second competitive program invites proposals from organizations throughout the state, usually nonprofit groups working with disadvantaged communities. About thirty proposals for short-term, small-scale projects from such organizations are selected each year. Students are recruited by, and work directly with, such organizations

for the duration of the project. Proposals must be for special tasks, not ordinary staff work, and are selected in part on the basis of the value such an experience will have for the student. Recent examples include documenting the accomplishments of Hmong women for the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota and a longitudinal study of childhood early intervention programs in a St. Paul neighborhood.

A third competitive program invites proposals for internships from state agencies, local governments, and local planning agencies. Eight or nine internships are selected each year, with the agencies sharing the costs with CURA.

Unsolicited Projects

The ability to respond to unsolicited proposals that come to CURA from many sources is an important part of our activity, and we maintain budget reserves to support such proposals when they (often suddenly) appear. Recent examples include a project initiated by two faculty members in applied economics outlining the impact of federal cutbacks on a county by county basis in Minnesota; a CURA supported Ph.D. dissertation in geography studying brownfield redevelopment issues in the metropolitan region, and two public affairs faculty analyzing exclusionary zoning practices in ten Twin Cities' suburbs.

The importance of CURA's ability to respond to proposals quickly and appropriately with qualified faculty, graduate students, and other resources was emphasized by the external review committee in its recent assessment of CURA. Their report noted that, "Unlike conventional research centers, CURA does not have a specific research agenda, developed by its director and associated faculty...CURA is constantly scanning the Twin Cities region and other Minnesota communities for opportunities for research, and the faculty of the university for scholars and students with match-able interests and capabilities."

CURA's Own Activities

From among many of CURA's own activities, two are worth noting here. First, we have begun to emphasize projects that include active involvement by community participants as they increasingly insist on being full partners in projects affecting them, rather than clients of outside experts from the university stopping in from time to time to solve problems for them.

We have developed four different programs to address this full community-partner issue. The first was created to assist Minneapolis with the planning phase of the city's $400 million neighborhood revitalization program. Funded initially by a U.S. Department of Education Urban Community Service Grant (Title XI), the project is a collaboration with other twin cities' colleges that supports faculty and graduate student work on neighborhood-generated research projects. The second program connects community-initiated research projects with classes being offered by collaborating twin cities' universities, and students enrolled in the classes work on the projects as part of their assignments. The third program provides student technical assistance for community-based organizations of color seeking help with research, program development, or evaluation, in which each student has both a faculty and a community mentor. The fourth is the newly inaugurated HUD-funded Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) project in collaboration with Macalaster College and Metropolitan State Uni-

versity, which will undertake a series of neighborhood-developed housing, education, and economic development projects on St. Paul's East Side.

The second activity involves CURA publications. Because many of our projects involve issues about which public debate is just beginning or is in its early stages, our research is often used to inform and enhance that debate, usually through our publications, two of which are unusual enough to merit mention.

"Commissioned" reports are written by faculty members who analyze Minnesota issues. The most recent was a series on questions illuminated by the 1990 Census. Separate reports examined housing in Minnesota in 1990; analyzed income and poverty across the state and within the Twin Cities metropolitan region and looked at overall poverty rates among the poorest of the poor; studied the characteristics of poverty with emphasis on race, the working poor, and single-mother heads of households; and compared recent trends in Minneapolis/St. Paul with other metropolitan regions.

Our "newsletter," the *CURA Reporter*, is unlike most center newsletters in that it publishes very little news. Instead, it is a quarterly public issues report on the substance of CURA projects written for and distributed widely to an informed lay audience. The *Reporter* describes CURA projects only; it does not discuss current events, engage in debate on public issues, editorialize, or report on CURA activities. A typical issue includes three articles of 3,000 words each, usually authored by a faculty member. Examples of articles recently published include a comparison of redundant farmsteads on the urbanizing fringe of the Twin Cities and in southwestern Minnesota, a study of the environmental consequences of wild rice cultivation, and an examination of increasing African American poverty in the Twin Cities between 1980 and 1990.

How Is CURA Structured?

There are critical elements in CURA's organizational arrangements that make it possible to carry out its mission in the context of the university's structures. First, CURA is an all-university unit, thus enabling it to work with all colleges and departments. Second, the base program funding from state and university sources allows support of new ideas, especially when funding from other sources is unavailable, and simultaneously supporting the staff necessary to maintain community contacts, carry out brokering functions, work on their own projects, and generate additional resources from grants and contracts. Third, CURA's small permanent staff size and simplified decision-making allows maximum flexibility and the capacity to respond quickly to important new requests.

What Does CURA Accomplish?

It is not easy for centers like CURA to be precise about their accomplishments, achievements, and impacts. We do not teach students, and therefore cannot list credit hours of instruction or degrees granted. We can rarely point to research that is the equivalent of splitting the atom; much of our work is related to public policy issues and a direct impact is more difficult to assess. Centers like ours, with its multiple approaches and programs, plant seeds where the prospects look promising, but we are rarely able to identify direct consequences. We *can* provide some numbers that indicate accomplishments but not necessarily impacts. Each year CURA is involved in about 125 different projects involving approximately 25 faculty from 15-20 different univer-

sity departments, 75-80 graduate students from 15-20 departments, 9-10 state agencies, 10-15 local governmental agencies, and 75-80 community organizations. Some of these projects are small, some large; some involve research that is more basic, some more applied; and some are primarily technical assistance or internships. We can also list the $500,000-$1,000,000 in external grants and contracts generated each year. We can cite the number and variety of our publications, some 400 monographs, research reports, and books over the years, including the CURA *Reporter* that is mailed to about 4500 readers. These are certainly indicators of activity, if not of impact.

It is also possible to survey various constituent groups—faculty, students, CURA alumni, governmental agencies, and community organizations—for their assessment of CURA and the value of the project or experience to them or their organization. A survey conducted in connection with our 1995 program review showed, for example, that more than 95 percent of the faculty were "satisfied or very satisfied" with the research component of their CURA work, more than one-quarter had published an article in a professional journal based on their project, and 40 percent had already obtained additional related funding. We also learned that 75 percent of the graduate students reported that their CURA experience complemented their course work, and 25 percent of the students and alumni believed that their CURA work changed their career directions. Virtually all government agencies and community organizations rated their CURA project as "important," or "very important," with about two-thirds indicating that they were "very satisfied" with the final product. Again, these kinds of data do not measure impacts directly, but they do at least give a sense of the value of CURA projects to our various constituency groups.

As a follow-up to our program review, we have begun to document as much as possible the direct results, consequences, or impacts of many of our projects. We have traced the fates of programs that we initiated, nurtured, and spun-off to more appropriate long-term homes. We also document projects where our resources have been leveraged to generate more substantial grants of support. We track projects that have had direct policy consequences (e.g., one led to changes in the law regarding the establishment of paternity). And we have identified CURA-supported projects that generated new organizational activity in the community, such as the one that documented the threat of mortgage prepayment on federally assisted affordable housing that subsequently led to the creation of a foundation-supported Minnesota Housing Partnership.

Collecting and analyzing all these data on a regular basis is expensive, but doing so helps us and others understand better how our constituents react to our work, broadens our understanding of the differences we make, and begins to provide a way to keep track of our direct impact as well as the levels of our activity. All these measures of accomplishment are increasingly important in an environment that requires accountability.

Lessons Learned

There are six major lessons that CURA has learned over the years. First and foremost, perhaps, is to involve the strongest faculty from as many parts of the university and on as many projects as is possible. This is especially important at a research institution, which is often skeptical about community-oriented work and at a land grant university where the term "land grant" has many meanings. Using strong faculty helps to ensure high quality products (which, incidentally, the community appreciates) and

helps to establish and maintain the credibility of the center's programs inside the institution. The most important element in attracting faculty usually lies in developing projects that are related to her or his research interests. It also helps if a project can provide support for and be relevant to a faculty member's graduate students, and it doesn't hurt if some salary is provided, especially for those on academic year appointments.

Second, it is important to understand the value of a CURA work experience for graduate students beyond what is gained by utilizing their skills. We use 75-80 graduate assistants each year and, because we recruit from all across the university, those who apply and are chosen for positions are usually those most interested in and capable of contributing to a particular project. Students usually interact very successfully with organizations and agencies and thus are superb ambassadors from the university to the community. Involving students in our projects is often an excellent way to educate faculty about our work and sometimes to entice them to become involved as well. A CURA experience is often important for students in their degree programs and subsequent careers, which makes it all the more important to use students on projects that are educationally valuable for them and, when necessary, to protect them from assignments that are inappropriate or exploitative. Thus the involvement of graduate students in our work has been a win/win experience.

Third, it is increasingly valuable to involve persons, groups, agencies, and organizations as fully as possible in projects that affect them. In the long run this can improve the quality of the projects and also strengthen the relationships between the university and the community. However, in the short run, real tensions may be created among the partners as they learn to accommodate differing roles, competencies, and responsibilities while protecting the intellectual integrity of the project.

Fourth, we need to tell our stories as simply, effectively, and as often as possible. Until we can explain what we do more fully and clearly to many different audiences, it will be difficult to strengthen our roles both inside and outside the university.

Fifth, despite the importance of involving faculty and graduate students, some level of full-time professional staff is critical to develop and maintain the community contacts so essential to a program's success, help bridge the gaps between academic calendars and schedules required by projects in the community, and develop substantive expertise to complement what is available from the faculty.

Sixth, a relatively small unit like CURA is never going to be the only game in town. This is a large and comprehensive university in a large and complex metropolitan region and state in which the number and quality of people employed in the public or nonprofit sector is high. Rather than staking out and trying to hold particular territories, we have kept our substantive interests flexible. This way we hope to add value by collaborating with those who can use help with what they are doing and developing new projects where there are unmet needs.

There have been other important lessons as well. The capacity to be flexible and nimble in responding to new initiatives is critical in CURA's work, which requires financial resources and special staff skills. The knowledge and patience to respond to all kinds of inquiries and to be a helpful point of access to the university for the community is also important. And understanding enough about the academic and professional cultures of the many disparate fields in a comprehensive university is essential

to working with faculty and students. Finally, sharing project costs with other partners as much as possible gives them a stake in the process and conserves scarce resources.

Looking Back And Looking Ahead

It seems clear in looking back over a 30-year history that, one way or another, the university would have undertaken most of the functions that CURA performs even if our particular center had not been established in 1968. And it seems equally clear that the university and the community have benefited significantly from the modest investment in CURA during those years. The External Review Committee that was part of our program review in 1995 summarized it this way "...CURA is a uniquely valuable asset of the University in carrying out its responsibilities as an urban, land grant university. It serves well five of the six elements of the ...mission statement approved by the Regents: Research, Graduate Education, Outreach, Diversity, and User-Friendliness. It clearly is in the interest of the University to maintain CURA, as it has a reputation in the communities, both outside and inside the University, as a trustworthy, responsible, and responsive organization of high intellectual standards and integrity. It has been critical to their success and to a sustained presence of the University in the community."

It is impossible to predict how an article such as this might read 30 years hence, because the changes that centers such as CURA will face will be as much a consequence of developments in universities and higher education as they will be of new urban issues. In the nearer term, however, there are at least two emerging trends worth noting.

First, in colleges and universities, the interest in urban issues that has waned since the mid-1970s is growing again. Universities are also more concerned about their roles in their communities, students are interested in internship and field-related educational opportunities, and publicly funded institutions are under greater pressure to help solve the problems of the communities in their states.

The second trend requires more discussion than space allows, but it could have significant long-term impact on university urban programs, because it involves the increasing interest by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state Cooperative Extension programs in urban issues and strengthening their roles in urban communities. Resolving all of the organizational and political issues will take some time and effort, but there is promise for bringing significant new extension resources to bear on urban issues along with the means for strengthening the links between university urban centers and their communities.

It may seem as if centers such as CURA have been in business a long time and should by now be well accepted and established. On the other hand, 30 years is only one academic generation, and, when we examine the history of our rural counterparts, the Agricultural Experiment Stations and the Cooperative Extension Services that have been active for well over a century, we find them still struggling with many of the same issues facing us in the urban business. But the experiences of the past 30 years have taught us much, and we are thereby better positioned to face the challenges and opportunities that will arise in the next three decades.