**CURA Strategic Planning Summary**

**October 20, 2009**

From July to October, 2009, CURA underwent a strategic planning process aimed at revisiting the core vision and mission statements of the organization, and charting out a set of strategic objectives to guide it over the next five years.

The process was largely completed by a planning group of nine individuals, six CURA employees and three external stakeholder representatives. Members of this strategic planning group reviewed the 2007 CURA self-study and the external reviews completed in 2008. Committee members directly interviewed 65 stakeholders inside and outside the University early in the process to solicit their views on the degree to which CURA was meeting the needs of key constituents and potential future directions for the Center. The planning group met five times between July 14 and October 12, 2009. The work of the committee served to reaffirm the values around which CURA was initially organized and resulted in the articulation of additional goals for moving forward. Though a wide range of topics were explored, the work of the planning committee focused on the following principles:

**The existing strengths of CURA lie in the community-based research and technical assistance that it funds**, connecting community organizations with particular research needs to faculty and students able to provide the necessary research expertise. Most of the resources deployed by CURA take one form or another of this community-based research and assistance. This makes CURA flexible enough to respond to a wide variety of requests, playing a brokering role connecting community interests to appropriate units within the University. This role is made possible by the fact that CURA is an *all-University* center able to access and leverage resources across all collegiate units. CURA must build on this record of accomplishment and continue to maintain the high quality of work it produces with its community partners.

In addition to the work that CURA does in response to community-input, **there are opportunities to identify key issues on which CURA might sponsor longer-term, collaborative research efforts.**  Such an approach has the potential for generating higher-impact research, greater external funding, and establishing more frequent cross-University collaboration. Here again, CURA’s nature as an all-University center positions it well to take on this role. Establishing longer-term relationships with faculty from a range of units can be beneficial both to CURA in terms of producing more influential research and to faculty members in the form of more on-going research support. A challenge for CURA moving forward is to find the right balance between strategic investments of research support in key issues and the continuation of CURA’s successful community-based research and assistance efforts.

As a unit that focuses on applied research, **CURA must find ways to maximize the community- and policy impact of its work, and to document that impact.** Steps should be taken wherever possible to ensure that the lessons of CURA-supported research are transmitted to and translated for the appropriate communities of policy makers and organizations. The CURA planning group discussed several means by which findings could be more widely and more directly disseminated to interested parties. Initiating a post-research effort of dissemination and documentation of impact will enhance the value of CURA’s applied research efforts.

To augment the work it does and the connections it builds between the University and its urban and regional community, **CURA should expand its effort to convene local and national actors on a range of issues of interest locally**. CURA has one highly successful model for this already in place; the CURA Housing Forum attracts 50 to 100 people on a monthly basis from across the metropolitan area to consider current issues facing practitioners and researchers in the housing and community development field. The attendees are public officials, community organizers, non-profit staff members, students and faculty. This model can be replicated and expanded to facilitate public discussions of a wide range of metropolitan issues.

The work that CURA does is central to the University of Minnesota’s land grant mission. CURA’s focus should continue to emphasize the application of the University’s resources to the needs of its urban and regional community and specifically to disadvantaged groups within that community. As a unit with a 40-year history, a wealth of experience in applied urban research, and an abundance of strong community relationships, **CURA should be a centerpiece in the University of Minnesota’s urban agenda**. CURA should stand ready to work with the full range of units within the University, providing leadership by deed and collaboration in efforts to establish effective University-community partnerships.

With these principles in mind, the strategic planning committee recommends the following vision and mission statement be adopted for CURA:

**VISION**

*The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) strives to be a nationally recognized model for university-community engagement.*

CURA is founded on the belief that partnership between the University and the community is mutually beneficial. Communities determine issues important to creating vital places to live and work, and provide an understanding of the context of these issues. The University contributes extensive knowledge and expertise to understand community issues and collaborate on new approaches to address them. This model of engaged research leads to outcomes that strengthen the community and enrich academic research and teaching.

**MISSION**

*CURA connects the resources of the University of Minnesota with the interests and needs of urban communities and the region for the benefit of all.*

CURA pursues its urban and regional mission by facilitating and supporting connections between state and local governments, neighborhoods, and nonprofit organizations, and relevant resources at the University, including faculty and students from appropriate campuses, colleges, centers or departments. CURA delivers timely and innovative research and technical assistance, offering solutions to critical issues by working to:

* Collaborate with communities and agencies to define and address their research and technical assistance needs
* Assist faculty to produce high quality, applied research on critical issues
* Expand the education and professional experience of students through applied research projects
* Disseminate research results to the community, policy makers, and academics
* Convene public events for the discussion of issues, the exploration of policy alternatives, and the identification of new research opportunities.

**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES, 2010-2015**

In order to fulfill its mission and realize its vision, CURA will focus on the following strategic objectives over the next five years:

1. Produce focused and high-quality community-based research and technical assistance.
2. Ensure that community-based research and technical assistance have significant community impacts.
3. Inform public policy through applied research.
4. Enhance the visibility and stature of CURA both within and outside the University.
5. Build and maintain strong connections with faculty and students in units throughout the University.
6. Build and maintain strong partnerships with external funders and with public, private, and nonprofit agencies.
7. Improve CURA’s ability to mobilize and manage the resources necessary to fulfill our mission.
8. Create and maintain a supportive working environment for staff and students.

**PRIORITY ACTION STEPS**

Listed below are the priority action steps that will begin to accomplish the strategic objectives.

1. Enhance the issue-focus of CURA research, including identifying and supporting research on “theme” issues. This requires the identification of resources that can be used to support collaborative, long-term research efforts, the identification of potential University partners (for funding as well as for research and planning), and the exploration of means of identifying themes to pursue, including ways of incorporating community input.

2. Explore means of establishing longer-term relationships with faculty. Investigate various “faculty-affiliate” models already in place at CYFC, IonE, and elsewhere.

3. Maximize the policy impact of CURA supported research. Initiate a post-research process of connecting principal investigator with interested and appropriate policy officials and constituent organizations, perhaps by scheduling briefings at which PIs summarize findings and implications for members of the policy community, and/or scheduling forums for presentation of findings.

4. Track the community and policy impact of CURA projects. Establish an internal evaluation capacity within CURA to follow up with PI and with community-based partner and to write up case examples. This information should be automatically pipelined from the evaluator to CURA communications staff (see #7 below). Impact is also understood as the degree of support CURA provides to students/faculty in various collegiate units.

5. More fully develop a role for CURA in convening on issues of metropolitan and regional significance. Three options exist in this area: a) public events of interest locally, such as mayoral debates, gubernatorial debates, or “issues of the day”; b) a “lecture series” that focuses more on academic, scholarly presentations that could bring in external experts or focus on U of M faculty (e.g., the Population Center series, the Law and Ethics series, etc.), or; c) the presentation of CURA research findings – i.e., requiring all faculty projects supported by CURA to conclude with a public presentation of findings (see also #3 above).

6. Further investigate and develop the idea of a CURA post-doc; a position shared between CURA and a (rotating?) academic unit. How can we incentivize the participation of academic units? What would be the share of roles, responsibilities and funding that would make program work?

7. Improve CURA’s communications strategy. Create a comprehensive strategy for disseminating research findings and for reporting on CURA activities. This includes a review of our existing publication (CURA Reporter) and web-site, as well as the consideration of additional efforts, including e-newsletter, CURA blog, annual report, and others.

8. Enhance the development and fundraising capacity of CURA. This can be done through a closer working relationship with resources available at the Office of System Academic Administration or by developing on-staff capacity.

9. Consider the creation of a CURA Advisory Board. Review the role and utility of advisory boards in place for other centers at the University, and identify potential community members appropriate for such a role.

10. Initiate specifically identified efficiency and quality improvements in internal processes. This includes an orientation for CURA RAs regarding hiring procedures and research ethics; the creation of job descriptions for all CURA positions, greater use of e-technology for scheduling and document storage, and space improvements in the CURA office suite.