

Campuses: [Twin Cities](#) [Crookston](#) [Duluth](#) [Morris](#) [Rochester](#) [Other Locations](#)

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Driven to Discover™

myU [One Stop >](#)

Search Websites and People [Search](#)

DISCOVER

[Health + Medicine](#) [Science + Technology](#) [Arts + Humanities](#) [Vision + Leadership](#) [More Topics](#)



A burgeoning program matches the expertise of U students and faculty with communities to advance sustainability and resilience.

[CAMPUS + COMMUNITY](#) | [TEACHING + EDUCATION](#) | [VISION + LEADERSHIP](#)

Tuesday, December 24, 2013

Connecting with communities

Just east of the heart of the metro, the world’s largest stucco snowman—the iconic emblem of North St. Paul—flashes a wide grin at passing motorists on Highway 36.

Behind this snowman’s back some great things are happening in this community of 11,000-plus people, in part because of a unique collaboration with the University of Minnesota’s Resilient Communities Project (RCP).

Now in its second year, the RCP has connected two communities—Minnetonka and North St. Paul—with U students and faculty to advance issues of local sustainability and resilience.

What makes the program so impressive is its breadth and depth. During the fall semester alone, North St. Paul (this year’s partner) identified 14 community improvement projects, and those were matched with 24 University courses involving some 300 students—and spanning eight different colleges and schools.

As one example, North St. Paul is seeking to take better advantage of a

30-acre nature preserve that neither residents nor visitors take full advantage of. So U students are coming at it from the angles of a design class, a class at the University of Minnesota Duluth that's doing an operations and management plan, and a class this spring that will focus on tourism and drawing visitors to the city.

“To me, it sort of exemplifies the land-grant mission,” says Carissa Schively Slotterback, *director of the RCP and associate professor and director of the Urban and Regional Planning Program at the U's Humphrey School of Public Affairs*. “It's about connecting directly with communities and doing it in a way that goes beyond the typical model of public engagement, which can sometimes be sort of one-way.

“We do a lot of intense collaboration with the [city] staff. That means we can't work with every community, but the work with the communities that we're engaged with through the partnership is *really* deep.”

Up and running quickly

The RCP developed out of interest from the Graduate Sustainability Education Network, a group of faculty focused on enhancing sustainability education. They identified Portland, Oregon's Sustainable City Year Program and decided to institute a variation of it at the University of Minnesota.

A few months later, the blueprints were in place for the RCP, which partners with both the Institute on the Environment and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.

Each year the project chooses a partner city through a competitive RFP (request-for-proposal) process. Once the city is chosen, the community identifies issue and needs, and the RCP helps identify potential projects.

The City of Minnetonka was the first partner, in 2012-13. Thirteen projects were chosen over the course of the academic year and matched with almost two dozen courses and about 180 students, again spanning eight colleges and schools.

“One of the more exciting things about the program is that ... it really spans the University, and I think that's one of the ways the city benefits,” says Mike Greco, the RCP's program manager. “They often think about

these problems in very narrow terms, just because of their own disciplinary perspectives and blinders. To bring students from across the University to the table to think about these problems really expands the options the city can consider, and provides a broader perspective on some of the issues.”

An example in North St. Paul involves the issue of “aging in place,” he says. By the year 2025, it’s estimated that 20-25 percent of city residents will be 65 or older, and much of the housing stock is aging, as well.

The city began to think about what residents need to be able to age in place in their home and in their communities—to raise a family *and* retire there.

The RCP encouraged the city to think beyond the surface issue of housing, since aging in place involves many more aspects.

In fall semester that project was matched with three courses:

- a class that examined the housing issue in particular
- a social work course where students performed in-home assessments examining home design and issues involving transportation, medical services, and volunteer services;
- and a gerontology course that looked beyond just city-based social services.

“I think it’s an interesting project,” Greco says. “It’s [really] helping policy makers and decision makers in the city understand that there are nonprofit organizations and business solutions to some of these issues, ... [and] opportunities for public-private partnerships that can help achieve the city’s goal.”

A positive response from all parties

According to Slotterback, the feedback on the RCP has been positive on all fronts, from students and faculty to the communities involved.

“The response has been really, really positive from the partner communities themselves,” she says. “They’re talking about ways that it’s helping enhance their capacity, allowing them to do work on new projects

that they wouldn't be able to work on, and to add depth and new ideas and creativity to efforts that they're already undertaking or that are priorities for the community."

Adds Slotterback : "I'm excited about it in terms of curricular innovation—our ability to advance education, learning, knowledge, and sustainability, and doing that in a way that connects across campus and collaborates with communities as a setting for that learning. That to me is really, really important."

<http://discover.umn.edu/news/campus-community/broad-u-outreach-project-helps-make-communities-more-resilient>