

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Minneapolis, Minnesota, showing a wide river (the Mississippi) flowing through it. In the foreground, a large, curved parking lot is filled with cars. To the right, there are several large, multi-story brick buildings, possibly a university campus. In the background, a dense urban skyline with various skyscrapers is visible under a blue sky with some clouds. A bridge with a red and white structure spans the river in the middle ground.

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The cover image is aerial view of University of Minnesota East and West Bank campuses and the Mississippi River. Photographer Patrick O’Leary. Image via University of Minnesota.

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PERSPECTIVES

COMMUNITY-ENGAGEMENT AND LOSS

By Sara Axtell

In the twenty years I have worked for the University of Minnesota, I have had many opportunities to be involved in partnerships with community organizations. These partnerships can create an incredible space for learning for the faculty, staff, and students who participate. My own partnerships have transformed my work and my sense of who I am in the world. I feel a deep gratitude to the community elders and teachers, particularly my partners at the Cultural Wellness Center in South Minneapolis, who have invested heavily in my development and helped

to shape my understandings of communities and universities.

In my current position at the University, I serve as a Faculty Development Liaison at the Office for Public Engagement. In this role I help to create opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to deepen our capacity to build respectful and authentic partnerships. Typically when we talk about “faculty development,” we focus on the skills, knowledge, and competencies we need to gain. But as we deepen our capacity to collaborate



*Morrill Hall, home to the University of Minnesota's Office for Public Engagement.
Image via University of Minnesota.*

with communities, we also need to think about what we need to lose.

In my role as a Faculty Development Liaison, I hear stories from both faculty and community members about their experiences of working together. There are stories of conflict, of transformation, of frustrations, and of healing. Many of these stories, especially the painful ones, hold knowledge about what we need to learn and lose in order to work together. In this piece, I share stories of moments I experienced or witnessed and highlight the knowledge that has surfaced from them.

I was sitting in a meeting with elders and community workers with years of experience talking about creating a youth violence prevention program in the surrounding neighborhood. A person new to the group turned to me and asked, "How do we solve this problem of youth violence?"

We need to lose our sense of authority.

Many of us in an academic setting have been taught to answer questions, give our opinions,

and share our perspectives. We have learned that our perspectives hold weight. I know when I was a graduate student, and for many of the students I see today, there is a sense of infinite possibility. There is a sense that we can study anything that interests us and that we can solve any problem.

But as we engage more deeply with community elders and knowledge holders, we begin to lose this sense of authority. We see not only the strengths but also the limitations of our own knowledge. This new understanding helps us to see that what we bring is just one piece of a much bigger picture. We learn what questions are ours to answer and when we should defer to others' knowledge. We are on a long road learning to share intellectual authority (Seanhk-Ka & Axtell, 2007).

I thought I was going to be learning how to come into a community and use the evidence we have to develop interventions to improve community health. But I have heard from community leaders that that is not what they want from me. Now I don't know what my role can be.

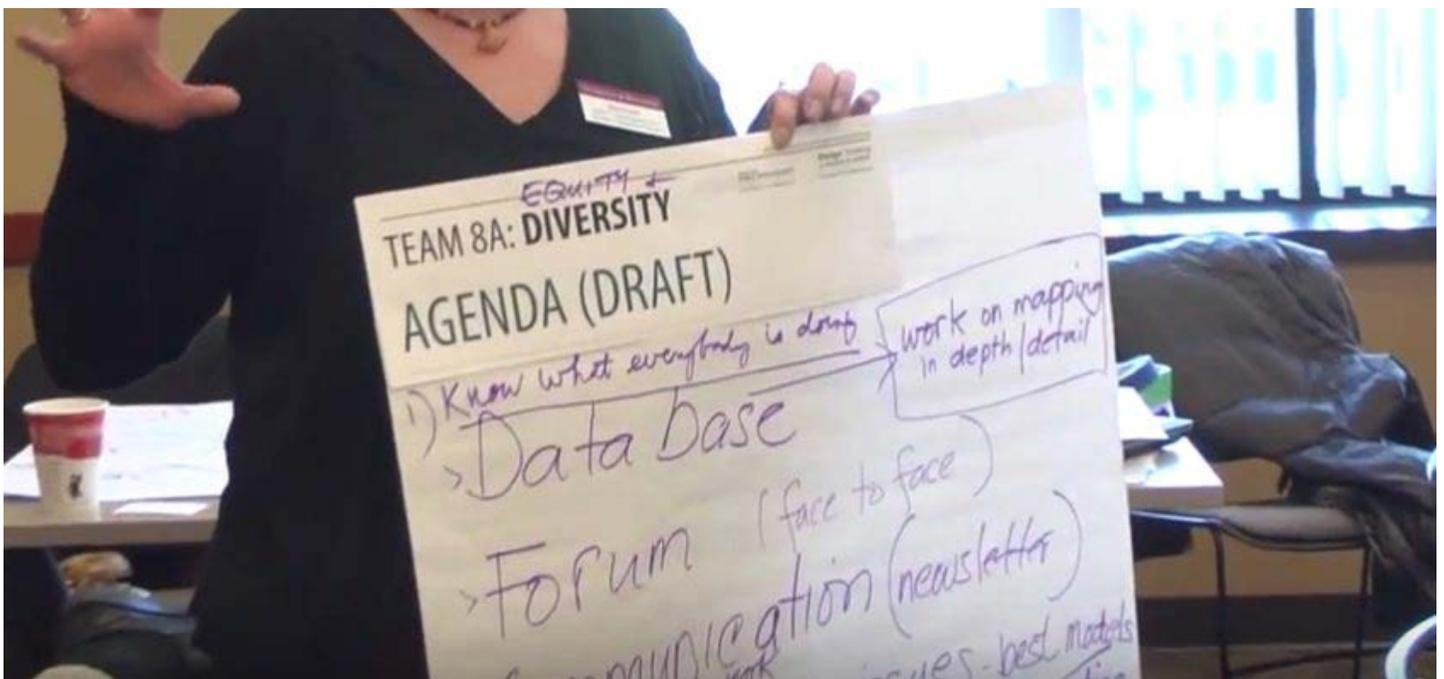


Image courtesy of the University of Minnesota's Office for Public Engagement.

We need to lose our sense of certainty.

When we let go of a sense of authority, we also lose our sense of certainty—our certainty about our role, about what our contribution can be, about what people’s expectations are of us. Instead of trying to quickly resolve these feelings, we have to deepen our capacity for living with ambiguity and uncertainty. We can get better at entering spaces and ways of being that are unfamiliar to us, and better at sitting with uncertainty.

In a community meeting, a researcher is giving a presentation about her research. A community member asks, “How have you been changed through this process? How has it impacted you as a person, not just as a researcher?”

We need to lose the separation we build between our personal and our professional selves.

In many of our professional and academic programs, we are taught to have strong boundaries between the personal and professional parts of our lives. We are taught to be “objective,” which

is seen as both achievable and desirable in many of our disciplines. There is a belief that bringing our personal selves into our work could make us less objective. Even when researchers’ personal stories play a role in our work, we are often cautioned against sharing too much of these personal dimensions.

But as we immerse ourselves in community work, there is an expectation that we will come to the table with our whole, authentic selves and that we are open to being transformed on a deeply personal level. There is an expectation that what we experience will help us to become more fully human.

A researcher is attending a neighborhood meeting to talk about the possibility of collaborating on a research project. Upon learning that they are from the university, one of the neighbors begins to ask questions about other research projects that had taken place in the neighborhood and to share concerns about how community members never heard anything back about the project findings.

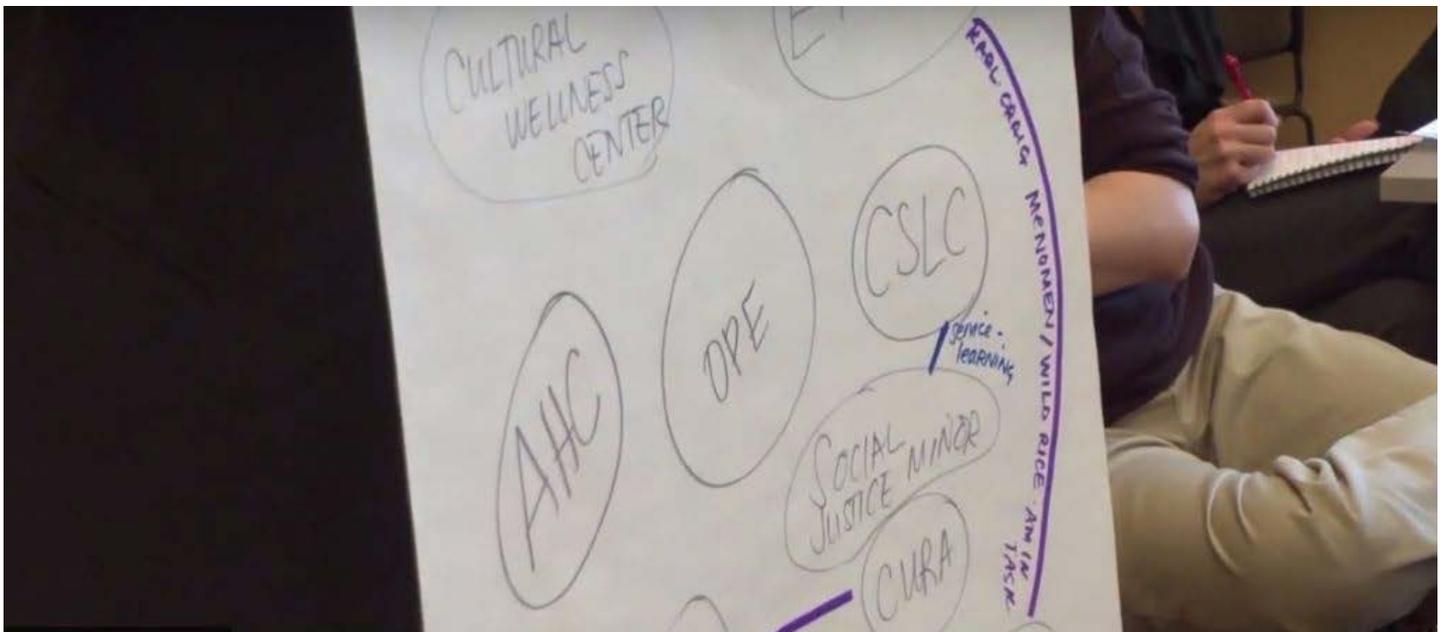


Image courtesy of the University of Minnesota’s Office for Public Engagement.

We need to lose a sense of ourselves simply as individuals.

In western cultures overall, and in American universities specifically, we have a particular understanding of accountability (Healing Roots, n.d.). We see ourselves as accountable for our own actions and perhaps the actions of other university staff we supervise. The idea that others in the community may hold us accountable for the actions of our institution as a whole may come as a shock.

In many of the communities I have had the opportunity to work with, people tell stories of the painful histories of exploitation and suffering that have been experienced as a result of research and of interaction with universities and people in professional roles.

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As we grapple with community perceptions of us, we begin to see ourselves as accountable not just for ourselves, but for becoming agents of transformation and for helping to change patterns of action that have caused damage in the past and present.

These losses can be painful, but they can also bring healing and growth. They can create the space for deeper, more authentic relationships, the space for different forms of knowledge to come together, and the space to begin to heal the painful histories that separate us.

When we learn what it is we need to lose, the healing becomes more possible.