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LAYERS

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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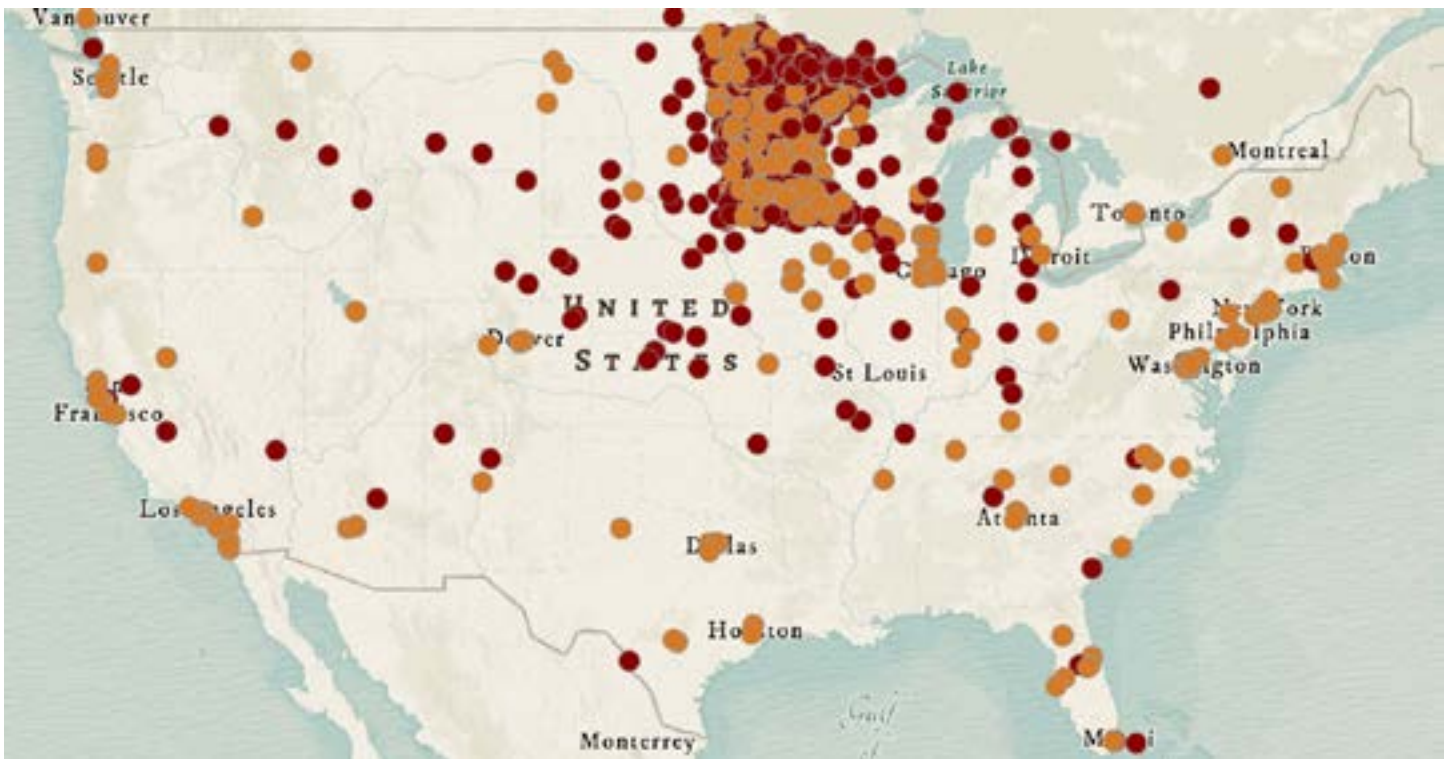
MAPPING ENGAGEMENT: A DIVE INTO THE UNIVERSITY'S COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PARTNERSHIPS

By Amber Cameron and John Craven

The University of Minnesota is working to share community-based academic projects and partnerships involving water resources—as well as other social and environmental concerns—as a way of illustrating the University's research-based, public engagement activities.

The [University of Minnesota Public Engagement Footprint](#) is a public database and map that details the breadth and scope of the

University's service, outreach, and community engagement across the state of Minnesota and beyond. Created by the [Office for Public Engagement](#) (OPE) in partnership with [U-Spatial](#), the Footprint is a work in progress; it currently has nearly 4,000 active entries, with approximately 75 percent of current entries representing partnerships in Minnesota. The projects that appear on the map are submitted voluntarily by researchers, faculty, and staff from across the



This is a map of the University of Minnesota's impact across the United States as illustrated on the Footprint map. Image courtesy of John Craven.

University's five-campus system to document ongoing partnerships with communities. The Footprint can be searched by geographic location, project type, community partner, Sustainable Development Goals as identified by the United Nations, and more.

The Footprint's framework was created in 2021 as part of the University's MPact 2025 Systemwide Strategic Plan as a way for University faculty and staff to locate, identify, and connect with others working in the same geographic areas or on a similar topic. In addition, the public can access the Footprint from the University of Minnesota system website to learn about University-community partnerships taking place in their neighborhoods, communities, and around the globe.

As an interdisciplinary tool, the Footprint provides a space to showcase the diversity of partnerships, such as the University's water-related partnerships. University-community partnerships represented in the Footprint can be searched in several ways, including by one or more of the [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) developed by the United Nations as part of its [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). Users of the Footprint can filter for water-related SDGs: (1) clean water and sanitation and (2) life below water. The Footprint currently contains 418 partnerships under the above two categories.

For example, the Footprint includes the [Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Area Long Term Ecological Research Program \(MSP LTER\)](#), a partnership between the University's College of Biological Sciences and [Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi](#), a Native-led environmental conservation nonprofit. Together, they are working to measure heavy metal levels in soils and plants in native plantings for pollinators. MSP LTER is part of a network of sites around the world funded by the National Science Foundation to study how urban stressors affect the ecological structure and functioning of urban nature, including

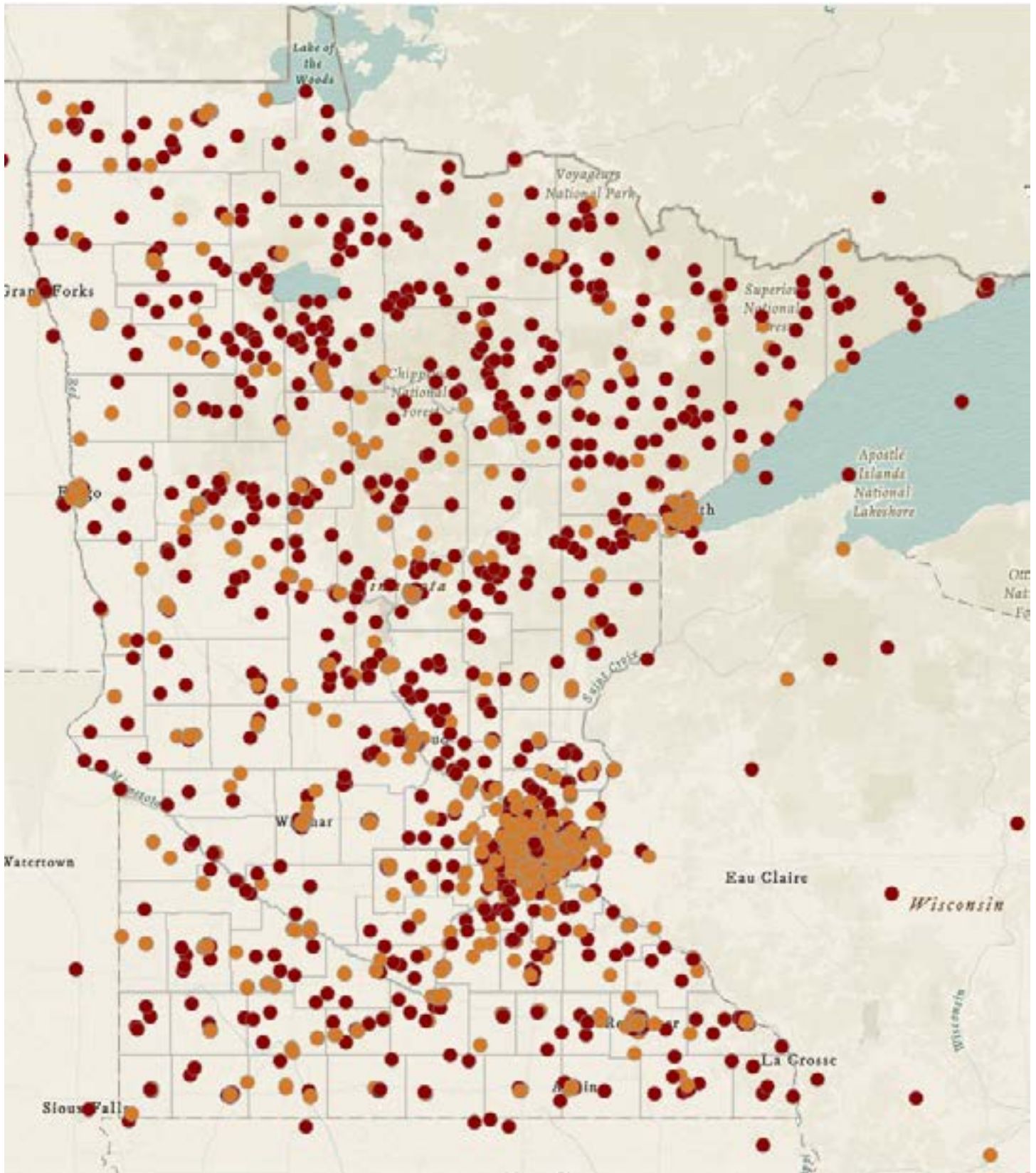
pollinators, urban forests, urban watersheds, and lakes and streams.

The Footprint also demonstrates that, led by the Department of American Indian Studies, faculty from across the University system are also working on a project with Indigenous partners, exploring the significance of place, community, and knowledge production in relation to humanities research and its impact on climate crisis research. This project involves several partners, including [Makoce Ikikcupi](#), a landback, restorative/reparative justice project that is developing a Dakota village at a 19-acre site in Granite Falls, Minnesota; working with Makoce Ikikcupi involves learning Indigenous modes of environmental caretaking.

On the Footprint, we can also find the work of the [Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center \(MAISRC\)](#) housed in the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences. MAISRC has built a collaborative network of volunteers, state and local government managers, and landowners across Minnesota to map and monitor invasive phragmites (common reed) and implement treatments, reversing the spread of



The Public Engagement Footprint logo clearly shows the outline of the state of Minnesota. Image courtesy of John Craven.



This is a screenshot of the Footprint map clearly showing the entries in the state of Minnesota. Image courtesy of John Craven.

this damaging plant. In 2016, MAISRC researchers determined that this plant posed a high risk of uncontrolled spread, and Minnesota had a critical window of opportunity to control the invasive species. MAISRC is now leading a collaboration of state and local partners throughout Minnesota to implement the removal of phragmites.

In continuing efforts to increase participation in the Footprint, staff from the Office for Public Engagement have been involved with many issue-related affinity groups throughout the University. As an example, an Office for Public Engagement staff member now participates on the University's Water Council, which serves to leverage resources from across the University to address pressing concerns of access to clean water. Participation in the Footprint is one way the council's mission of documenting University-community water-related partnerships is being supported.

Participation and sustainability are the biggest challenges for a data-driven project of the Footprint's scope. In fact, they are the main reasons why very few institutions of higher learning have been able to capture the full depth and breadth of their university-community work on an ongoing basis. While the University of Minnesota is a systemwide enterprise made up

of five campuses, it's a relatively decentralized organization. Without centralized control, ensuring alignment and consistency on projects and initiatives can be a challenge and participation in those projects and initiatives can vary from campus to campus, from college to college, and from unit to unit.

For example, some campuses, colleges, and units collect information on university-community partnerships through a centralized office, while others rely on individual faculty and staff reports. The University's Office for Public Engagement staff work with each campus, college, and unit on a one-on-one basis to incentivize and support the collection of Footprint data. And because sustainability of the Footprint is key to its success, OPE has dedicated staff time to the ongoing collection of data and site maintenance.

As participation in the Footprint grows, its usefulness will grow for both University researchers and the broader community. One of the most comprehensive, user-friendly digital maps of its kind, the Footprint provides a comprehensive platform where internal and external partners can learn more about work happening on specific topics and/or in specific communities, aiding in increased University-community collaboration throughout Minnesota and beyond.

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John Craven is the Footprint Project Coordinator at the Office for Public Engagement. John supports the development and aids in the coordination of the University of Minnesota's Public Engagement Footprint project. His duties include communication and outreach, as well as data support for the project and maintaining the database using ArcGIS. He holds a B.A. in economics from Luther College, with a focus in environmental economics and policy.