A series of campus forums in October 2015 brought together faculty, staff, and students to help identify where the University can marshal its research strengths most powerfully to address critical societal challenges.

Forums were organized around broad thematic areas overarching multiple ideas from faculty. The broad themes were Just and Equitable Societies, Human Health; Human Potential and Well-Being; Sustainable Cities and Resilient Communities; and Food, Water, and Energy. Summaries for each of the forums are posted on the TC Campus Strategic Plan website.

Grand Challenges Research Forum October 12, 2015
Theme: How Will We Ensure Just and Equitable Societies?

Introduction

*How will we ensure just and equitable societies?* The Grand Challenges Research Forum structured around this theme took place Oct. 12, with 130 faculty, staff, and students attending from varied University departments and programs. The agenda, overview, and discussion questions were posted two days in advance. Five members of the GC Research Team were the primary organizers and “listeners” for this forum: Ann Masten (team lead), Efi Foufoula-Georgiou, Richard Leppert, Fionnuala Ni Aolain, and Karen Seashore.

The following summary synthesizes notes from recorders who were on hand to capture key elements of the discussions. It highlights important points, recurring themes, and potential connections identified through the discussions.

Summary of Discussion

These questions were posed for table discussion.

- In regard to issues of justice and equity, what are the most pressing challenges facing the state of Minnesota? The nation? The globe?
- What are the current strengths and potential of the University to achieve unique and extraordinary impact on these challenges over the next 10 years?
- What will take us there? What gaps must be filled to realize this vision? What new collaborations are vital to this effort? (outside the box, any level)
The discussions were wide-ranging, with some tables focusing more on research ideas related to the overarching theme of ensuring just and equitable societies, while others focused especially on strategies for the University to transform itself in order to engage more effectively in interdisciplinary collaborations and innovative solutions to Grand Challenges.

There was strong consensus that the broad thematic area of just and equitable societies was one in which the University could draw on many existing research and curricular strengths. The University’s large faculty has not only great breadth, but notable depth of expertise and strong networks on issues related to social equity and justice. Additionally, discussions highlighted the exceptional capacity of the University to conduct research, model equality and inclusion, and to leverage its work through collaborations with local and global partners. The University already has many established ties to research, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations relevant to addressing issues of equity and justice at the local, state, national, and international level.

Participants noted that our location brings both special responsibilities and tremendous opportunities, shared by few other institutions, for collaborations with diverse communities to address challenges related to inequality. The location of our flagship campus in a major metropolitan area (with a diverse population of more than 3 million people) is rare for a land-grant public research university, and we have the additional advantage of campuses located in the smaller cities of Duluth and Rochester, as well as in Crookston and Morris.

The Twin Cities and Minnesota are home to richly diverse communities and cultural traditions, including indigenous American Indian cultures, African American communities, refugees from conflicts around the globe, and generations of immigrants. At the same time, participants noted that while Minnesota generally is economically advantaged, healthy, and educated, major disparities (racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic) leave many behind, impede the vitality of communities, and threaten the state’s future.

Participants discussed the responsibility and potential of the University to lead by example, making a commitment to embrace diversity and equality of opportunity, showcasing both current and new initiatives. For example, the University could build a model of inclusion, education, and engagement focused on diversity that would create a unique merger of R1 research university strengths with land-grant mission. We could create innovative processes that both address and model equality and diversity. Participants suggested the University has unique opportunities to address critical societal challenges “inwards and outwards” and to partner with communities to foster inclusion and success of diverse residents, including native students and communities, historically disadvantaged groups, recent immigrants, and individuals with disabilities.

Discussions also homed in on the need for the University to align its incentives, cultures, values, and budgets to more readily support collaborative, transdisciplinary research and education. This project of academic transformation, which is reflected in the goals of the Twin Cities campus strategic plan, was identified as “an internal grand challenge.” Reward systems, including promotion and tenure criteria, as well as internal budget practices, currently favor more narrowly focused, short-term, and specialized goals rather than collaborative scholarship, innovation, education, or campus-community collaboration around Grand Challenges.

Participants expressed striking enthusiasm for opportunities to engage in meaningful cross-disciplinary dialogue on Grand Challenges and a larger vision for the University. At the same time, participants acknowledged the challenges inherent in fostering collaboration and inclusiveness. Many
participants expressed keen interest in opportunities that would afford time and space for meaningful discussion; facilitate connections with colleagues across the University; and open up opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations in research, education, and engagement. Additionally, there was discussion on ways to ensure an inclusive dialogue that engages community and multi-disciplinary voices from the outset.

**Key Areas of Strength**

Among the many topics and themes that cluster under the broad umbrella of just and equitable societies, participants identified a number of areas of notable strength.

- **Human Rights**

  Table discussions routinely underscored University strengths, commitments, and collaborations related to advancing human rights and dignity. Participants noted the richness of activities already firmly in place on human rights that are interdisciplinary in nature, as well as significant related community strengths and commitments. Identified cross-disciplinary strengths include research and scholarship on reconciliation and restorative justice, civil rights, the penal system, violence towards women and girls, human trafficking, and peace-building.

- **Inclusion and Equity for Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities**

  There was considerable discussion of the University’s strengths and unique opportunities related to addressing issues of inclusion and equity among individuals and communities facing historical injustices, structural racism, and discrimination in Minnesota and beyond, including Native American Indian indigenous populations, African Americans, Latinos, recent immigrants from around the globe, war refugees, and others. Participants identified numerous collaborative efforts already under way to foster equity, understanding, trust, opportunities, scholarship, and partnerships with diverse racial/ethnic/cultural communities in the Twin Cities region and throughout the state. Addressing these issues also draws on strengths of the University’s location, students, faculty, and history.

  Participants identified tremendous potential to expand related work for greater impact. Potential areas of focus include the relationship of the state and the University to Indian nations; addressing the challenge of not only welcoming immigrants and refugees (an area in which Minnesota has been a leader), but also ensuring equity and inclusion for newcomers; and challenges of equity and inclusion for people of color and ethnic and cultural minorities who are long-term residents. Work in this area could also leverage and develop a broader range of University capacities—for example, recruiting and hiring to boost the diversity of the University and extend its capacity to address these issues through example and deeper engagement.

- **Equity in Access to Resources for Life**

  Many participants noted that a broad focus on resources for life as an equity/disparity issue draws on major University strengths and existing multidisciplinary programs. Existing research strengths in related areas include work across multiple departments addressing challenges related to equitable access to resources, particularly water and food; these issues overlap with issues of human rights, focusing on physical necessities.

  Research pertaining to water access, distribution, and usage was especially notable as a recurrent theme across the discussions, linked to issues of wealth inequality, resource management,
structural racism, and the disparate impact of climate change, as well as to issues of identity and community that affect community vitality. Other areas of focus in which the University has notable strengths include sustainability of human-environmental systems; housing; food insecurity; and addressing issues of disparate access and impact related to technological advances.

• **Healthy Lives**
  Discussions focused on the University’s exceptional capacity related to multidisciplinary approaches to health. Minnesota is a leader in research and businesses related to human health and well-being, as well as agriculture and animal life. Participants highlighted unique potential for the University to be a leader in a unified or integrative study of health—the “one health” approach focused on the interdependence of human, plant, and animal life. Integrative approaches highlight the interdependent nature of living systems for understanding and promoting health. This could achieve powerful impact in addressing intersecting variables that lead to disparate health outcomes. Participants also highlighted particular University strengths in addressing issues related to disabilities and the challenges of those with special needs.

• **Children and Youth**
  Participants noted the University’s research strengths related to the development of children and young people and its particular salience to issues of inequality. Several participants noted that the well-being of children is a powerful barometer for both assessing and intervening in socioeconomic and racial disparities, i.e., using the lens of “How are the children—all of the children?” Across multiple disciplines and levels of inquiry, the University has both broad and deep expertise in addressing disparities in health, income, justice, education, and achievement. Areas of strength mentioned range from epigenetics and neuroscience to economics and public policy. Participants also noted many connections with state and local efforts to address inequalities of opportunity (as well as issues of racism and discrimination) that have lifelong consequences for the health, well-being, and human capital of communities and societies. Participants noted that addressing challenges in this area is particularly appropriate for a land-grant research University and also is well-aligned with regional, state, national, and international priorities.