

## ***Working In “The Zone”: Reflections on Community Partnerships in North Minneapolis***

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The City of Minneapolis suffers from severe racial disparities. While Minneapolis is often trumpeted nationally as an affordable, thriving metropolitan area and an economic success story, those narratives are not the day-to-day reality for many residents of the city. Decades of institutionalized racism, intergenerational poverty, and exclusionary practices such as redlining have caused dramatic disparities between white people and people of color. Many of these disparities occur spatially, with North Minneapolis—a predominantly Black, low-income area—having poorer outcomes than the mostly white neighborhoods in Minneapolis. Compared to the city as a whole, for example, the Northside of Minneapolis experiences lower educational outcomes, higher crime rates, and higher rates of unemployment than the rest of the city. The Metropolitan Council (the Twin Cities’ regional government) designated the Northside as a “racially concentrated area of poverty,” which indicates that more than half of the residents are people of color and more than 40 percent of residents have family incomes less than 185 percent of the federal poverty threshold. City officials, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders are working to resolve these disparities. Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges was elected in 2013 on a platform of racial justice and closing the city’s educational achievement gap. In 2015, North Minneapolis was designated a Promise Zone, which is a sign of the federal government’s investment in North Minneapolis. In addition to these policy-driven solutions, community leaders are working directly on the ground to fight against racial disparities and close the achievement gap on the Northside.

In spring 2016, Macalester College’s Urban GIS (Geographic Information Systems) class partnered with both the Northside Achievement Zone, an organization that is working to close the achievement gap, and the Community Development Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. The Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) follows a place-based approach to end intergenerational poverty, approaching the problem holistically and considering many different variables that influence a child’s life outcomes. This wraparound approach is based on the model of the Harlem Children’s Zone, a similar program in New York City that used a wraparound approach to begin closing the achievement gap. NAZ works in a 13x18 block section of North Minneapolis— “the Zone” —which is home to some of the most severe economic and educational disparities in the city. NAZ partners with schools in the Zone and offers direct support to families and students from a very early age. The organization focuses directly on educational outcomes by providing tutoring and mentorship. But in line with their holistic approach, NAZ also partners with other organizations to provide housing stabilization, financial education, and health services to participating families. As a class, we partnered with NAZ to explore the impacts the program has had on the Northside. We aimed to produce compelling visualizations that would affirm NAZ’s place-based approach and create a comprehensive portrait of North Minneapolis that the organization could use in its future efforts. Our guiding research question was: *What has been the comprehensive impact of the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) program on the Northside community so far?*

To reach these goals, our class divided into four thematic groups that would explore different aspects of the Northside: population, housing, economics, and health. We kept the

parameters of our research as broad as possible, keeping in line with NAZ's holistic approach. This allowed us to draw connections and explore how poverty and institutionalized racism are often the result of multiple, interconnected variables. Within the housing group, we focused on the makeup of the Northside's built environment, and the ways that it either assists or hinders the work of NAZ. After much discussion, we selected multiple variables for our analysis: patterns of homeownership, foreclosure rates, housing vacancies, the location of landlords, the physical condition of housing, and property values. We acquired data and mapped these variables not only to explore the current state of the Northside, but also to analyze how the neighborhood has changed over time and how it compares to other areas in Minneapolis.

The semester began with a few weeks of introduction to the Northside and the problems NAZ is currently tackling. We met with representatives from the Federal Reserve Bank's Community Development Office, who outlined the work that they are doing in the Northside and ways in which the Federal Reserve has tried to tackle some of these long-standing issues. The Executive Director of the Northside Achievement Zone, Sondra Samuels, took us on a bus tour of the Northside, which helped us to visualize the problems the area is facing. Hearing Sondra's perspective and thoughts on the Northside was one of the most valuable components of this partnership for me, as it helped me see the Northside through the eyes of a local community member and better understand the area and its residents. This was especially important as none of the fifteen students in our class had grown up in the Twin Cities, and a sizable number had never been to the Northside, though it is only a few miles from our campus. We were unfamiliar with the problems and inequities that face the Northside community. Even though an hour-long bus tour is no substitute for living in a community, the thoughts that Sondra offered during that tour greatly shaped the focus of my personal research. For example, Sondra's observations on rental properties that were in poor physical condition raised questions about the landlords that let those properties degrade. A major component of my research involved mapping the disconnect between where the Northside's landlords live in relation to the community. This was not a variable I initially sought to explore in my research, but it became a major part of my contribution to the final project as a direct result of Sondra's interest in the topic.

The Northside Achievement Zone functioned more or less as a client of this class, so we often revisited our research design and goals in order to better meet their needs. At times, this was discouraging, as I would invest hours in a particular data variable and map only to discover that NAZ wanted our work to go in another direction. There were certain variables I was very interested in, or thought I could easily visualize, that I did not pursue because they would not have been as helpful to NAZ. However, if we focused solely on what would fulfill us personally, the partnership would have suffered. A midterm progress report, where we shared our research design and some of our findings with NAZ representatives, was helpful and encouraging. It allowed us to recalibrate our research for the rest of the semester in order to better meet their needs. I am grateful for the feedback and criticisms we received throughout the project. Even though it led to moments of frustration and stress, it ultimately made our research more relevant and our partnership more fulfilling.

Throughout this project, I also had to balance my own personal goals with the goals of our community partner. As a class, our goal for NAZ was to produce visualizations that would be valuable to the organization and share information that could meaningfully inform its work. My personal goals included that, but they also included strengthening my GIS experience and working on a long-term project with a motivated group of my peers. When those goals came into conflict, I had to remind myself that this project was not about my own personal gain. This

partnership was not designed so I could show off my own GIS skills or enhance a resume. Course-based community partnerships constitute a mutually beneficial relationship. As students, we gained skills in GIS and project management; the community we worked with benefitted from the resources that we could offer them. This work was incredibly fulfilling, and I would be lying if I said my GIS skills didn't improve because of the course. But focusing on my own individual accomplishments from this class obscures the benefits that the entire community gains when a partnership like this is created.

This project challenged my role as a researcher, and made me question what the proper function of the class is while working on a project such as this. We were a mostly white class, and none of us called the Twin Cities home. I am not an expert on the Northside nor on structural racism. Community groups such as NAZ and other individuals have been working on these same issues long before our class partnership. They have a much greater understanding of the community's needs and strengths. Our job is not to supplant their work or shine the spotlight on ourselves; our job is to complement the work they are doing by offering up our own services and skills. We may not have the direct experience of living in the Northside and confronting racial inequities on a daily basis, but we have access to data, GIS fluency, and time that could benefit NAZ's work. As our class demonstrated, it is essential to explore one's positionality during a project such as this, and we should recognize that shapes how we explore this partnership.

I am incredibly grateful that opportunities for community-based learning like this partnership exist. I believe community-based learning classes represent the best moments of a liberal arts education. Throughout this partnership, we thought critically about a problem, approached it from many different angles, and produced information and research that hopefully moves us toward justice. This experience expanded the way I think about and see the world, and affirmed the idea that our education doesn't have to stop when we leave the classroom. Even at a school like Macalester that prides itself on civic engagement and working toward social justice, the opportunity to combine academics and working with a community is limited. It is rare that a college course begins with no idea of what will happen during the semester. As undefined as this course was at the beginning, experiences like this have been by far the most fulfilling and meaningful of my college career.

I am currently asking myself: What comes next? Despite all the work we put into our partnership, when it comes to the achievement gap and racial inequities as a whole, our research represents nothing more than a drop in the bucket. Dismantling structural racism and increasing opportunities for people of color will take many more years and many more resources. This is discouraging, as it shows just how deeply entrenched these problems are in society. The amount of work that we as a class put into this project far exceeded my original expectations, but at the same time I felt limited by what we could realistically complete during our short semester. I certainly hope that we laid a sustainable foundation for future partnership or GIS work in North Minneapolis, so that the conversation does not end even though the partnership has concluded and many of us have graduated. At the end of the semester, we transferred over all our data files and our maps to our community partners so that they can use them in further work if they desire. Instead of seeing this report as the fruition of our efforts, we should view it instead as a jumping-off point to spur further work on these issues.

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