The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter
Background
In July and August, 2011, 27 faculty and staff from across the University of Minnesota spent four days together exploring *The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter*. This training was hosted by the Center for Integrative Leadership in Partnership with InCommons (Incommons.org) with support from the University of Minnesota’s Extension Center for Community Vitality and Office for Public Engagement. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of positions and departments at the University, including faculty, teaching and administrative staff, and collegiate deans from eighteen schools, offices, centers and departments across the University, including the following:

*Office of Human Resources (Organizational Effectiveness, Center for Teaching and Learning), Extension (Children, Youth, and Family Consortium, Center for Community Vitality, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, College of Liberal Arts (Community Service-Learning Center, Office of Information Technology), Carlson School of Management, College of Education (Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development), School of Veterinary Medicine (Center for Animal Health and Food Safety), School of Social Work, Academic Health Center (Center for Spirituality and Healing), Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center, College of Design (Design, Housing, and Apparel, Center for Sustainable Building Research, Center for Changing Landscapes), Medical School.*

Purpose
The following specific purposes were defined prior to this training:

- Investigate and support hosting conversations as a core leadership practice and competence;
- Explore collaborative working as a strategic means for dealing with increasingly complex cross-cutting issues;
- Experience and learn how to use processes that invite people to contribute their diverse knowledge and skills to meet a common purpose;
- Expand harvesting skills (i.e. making meaning of what we have collectively discovered);
- Take the practice of hosting and harvesting and apply it to key strategic change projects in participants' lives and daily work;
- Strengthen the community of practitioners within the University of Minnesota and connect to the larger InCommons initiative.

All but one --twenty-six of the twenty-seven-- participants completed a post-training online feedback survey. Eighty-five percent (85%) of survey participants rated the training as valuable
or extremely valuable (4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5). Over half of the overall respondents rated it as extremely valuable. Additional feedback is summarized below.

**Schedule**
The first two days of the training were held on July 25th and 26th followed by a two-week break after which the last two days of training were held on August 10th and 11th. This was the first time an Art of Hosting training had been attempted in this four-day split format. This new schedule was a modification based on feedback from participants in two earlier 2011 Art of Hosting trainings (offered by the Bush Foundation) that the three day trainings were too long based on the intensity of the content and the time demanded away from the office. Without formal prompting through the survey, a few participants provided positive feedback regarding the split four-day format. These participants suggested that a three-day training might have been “less impactful” or “exhausting” and that the four-day split training was perhaps “stronger for reinforcing relationship-building” and that “it was helpful to reflect on the first two days before jumping into the last two days.” A different participant suggested a series of other scenarios including four half days with more time for practice in between, the traditional three-day format, or one full day once a month for 4 months.

**Value**
For many participants, this training was an exposure to new techniques, tools, and frameworks that, though they might have heard about before, they had not had the chance to experience. In discussing the portions of the training most valuable to them, many participants highlighted specific techniques or frameworks they found compelling. The technique most frequently mentioned was the reflective listening technique in which participants broke into groups of four and each shared a story while the other group members practiced reflective listening techniques. The next most frequently mentioned framework was *Theory U*, which was shared as a part of a series of simultaneous small group discussions. In addition, a couple participants listed Proaction Café and learning about Harvesting techniques as valuable while World Café, Conversion/Diversion, and the Chaordic Path were all mentioned once each in the survey. In addition to highlighting specific techniques of value, two other themes emerged from the survey around the value of this particular training for participants: the value of learning through practice and the value of this particular training in fostering meaningful relationships between participants from across the University.

**Balancing Learning with Practicing**
Participants equally highlighted the value of learning the fundamentals of the techniques and frameworks through mini-teaching sessions from the hosts and the value of learning-by-doing – being encouraged to practice the techniques and reflect on this practice in real-time during the training. While seventy-six percent (77%) of participants felt they had sufficient opportunities to
practice what they were learning over the course of the training, twenty-four percent (23%) did not.

Based on informal participant feedback from the first two days of the training, the lead hosts were clear in the second two days that they were intentionally creating more space for discussion about the various techniques and how they might be applied. A few survey participants emphasized the value of this discussion and suggested they would have appreciated this during the first two days as well. They suggested:

*Opportunities to think about how best to "harvest" ideas from meetings; opportunities to talk about different ways of "hosting" in various contexts.*

*More time for debriefing use of tools and discussion of how they could be applied in the work we do.*

An equal number of survey participants requested more time dedicated to practice. Five small group breakout sessions were provided as a part of the last day. A few survey participants felt these sessions sparked enough interest to have been offered to the larger group or provided multiple times as small group sessions.

*Loved the round robin learning opportunity the last morning around knowledge practices and design practices. Wanted to attend more than one of each of these - allow more time for this.*

*The small groups (i.e. Theory U) were extremely beneficial and should have been offered to the entire group.*

**Relationship-building**

Many participants emphasized that they valued the training as an opportunity to build relationships with colleagues across the University of Minnesota. Ninety-two percent (92%) of participants agreed that they made new connections or deepened relationships with colleagues over the course of the training. One person highlighted the value of having students in the training as well. Participants requested that they would like more opportunities to connect with colleagues from across the University in the future and one respondent requested advanced training next summer. Numerous participants also suggested that the opportunity to be trained in Art of Hosting practices be provided again for individuals affiliated with the University. In the words of these respondents:

*Best University conference I have attended in regard to meaning/purpose and building relationships with other University faculty and staff.*
Expand this training throughout the University community especially at the leadership levels. Use it to help develop innovative thinking and create a culture shift at the University.

Continue to give this training. I will recommend it to others.

Please consider reaching out to other campus professional organizations that might have members interested in your work.

More offered to University faculty and staff internal to the U of MN.

Critiques & Recommendations

Framing
When asked what advice they would provide for future trainings, a couple participants suggested that the introductory letter should be better suited to match the audience. They felt that this particular introductory letter was off-putting to an academic audience.

The introductory/acceptance letter was a turn-off and did not communicate what the actual tone of the training.

I heard from some colleagues that the invitation letter was a bit off-putting. I wondered if, for a university / institutional audience, if it could be better tailored?

Tone
Along similar lines, two survey participants suggested the overall tone of the training was off-putting. As one respondent put it:

My sense of the "tone" of the workshop was - for lack of a better phrase and to echo facilitator remarks - "touchy-feely". The specialized language, clapping activity, and some of the circle exercises etc. were distracting to me and seemed unrelated to the work at hand. My concern is that not all participants needed at important conversations enjoy this type of interaction, and I'd hate to disenfranchise them unnecessarily. Having said that I realize that the essence of the InCommons approach to facilitation is speaking from the heart, but not everyone does this in the same manner.

Very occasionally a remark or comment was made that presupposed that all participants hold the same views and values--namely left leaning democrats.
Two other respondents suggested that in order to balance the highly relational worldview implicit in the Art of Hosting training, more time could have been dedicated to discussing the different worldviews that inform how individuals respond to various styles of facilitation. They suggested:

*There should be more time for practice and an articulation of the worldviews individuals hold, not just an acknowledgment of differing worldviews.*

*Provide an opportunity to discuss differing views on the practices and patterns of the Art of Hosting.*

**Application and Building a Community of Practice**

Ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents claimed to have increased their understanding of how to host conversations as a resource for public engagement.

Ninety-three percent (93%) of participants agreed they are likely to incorporate Art of Hosting skills and practices into their work at the University. The same percentage agreed they are likely to incorporate Art of Hosting skills and practices into their lives outside of the University.

Eight-nine percent (89%) of participants felt they had a better understanding of the broader InCommons Initiative as a result of this training. Participants were encouraged to use InCommons.org as a way to stay connected as an intentional community of learning and practice.

**Conclusions**

Nearly all the survey participants found value in the training and expressed not only a commitment to applying what they had learned and practiced, but also an appreciation for the forging of new connections and deepening of existing relationships across the University. Many suggested they would be ambassadors for any future trainings of this nature among their colleagues. Though more work could be done in the future to tailor the framing and tone of this training to appeal to an academic audience, it was overall well received and impactful.