Community Connections Celebrates 10 Years

Public Affairs, Roger Williams University
Community Connections Celebrates 10 Years

RWU's Community Connections celebrates 10 years – totaling 50,000 service hours to more than 150 area organizations to date

August 19, 2014 | Public Affairs Staff

BRISTOL, R.I. – On Monday, Aug. 25, some 1,400 students, faculty and staff from Roger Williams University will lead the 10th Annual Community Connections day – the largest service program in the region – in which teams will work together with 56 local nonprofits on projects that range from cleaning local parks to running bingo at senior centers, and creating art projects with developmentally disabled adults.

Since its inception in 2005, Community Connections has totaled more than 50,000 hours of service to approximately 150 nonprofits, community-based organizations and government offices – from senior centers and historical museums, to animal shelters, camps and parks.
The program’s reach spans Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts, serving approximately 30 communities each year with 50-plus site locations that stretch from Little Compton to Charlestown.
“What started as an extension of our orientation program for new students has transformed into the largest community service program in the region and more – beyond this one day of service, our students are actively pursuing internships and volunteer positions with the nonprofits they learn about and serve on Community Connections Day,” says KC Ferrara, director of the University’s Feinstein Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement. “At the University, we’ve established a core value of commitment to community through service. As important as it is for us to teach students how to think critically or design a building, it’s imperative that we also teach our students to play a role in giving to the community.”

Many of the participating organizations have gained year-round volunteers, interns and employees as a result of the program. Students often proactively return to the nonprofits to volunteer or help spearhead new fundraisers and programs.

At the Benjamin Church Senior Center in Bristol, Roger Williams students lead the Senior Citizen Yard Work Day each fall, and the Bayside YMCA in Barrington now relies on student volunteers to transform its summer camp into a preschool classroom setting at the end of camp season. The James L. Maher Center, a nonprofit that offers programs and services for children and adults with developmental disabilities, has participated in Community Connections since its start and has expanded its collaboration with the University to the point that students now volunteer and lead events from Valentine’s Day dances to art exhibits.

“The Community Connections program at Roger Williams benefits everyone involved by providing student and staff volunteers to accomplish tasks which might otherwise go unfinished,” says Stan Dimock, operations assistant at Save The Bay, another longtime partner. “Over the years, we’ve had a number of students return for many of our volunteer events and projects such as our Bristol Harbor Earth Day cleanup, among others. We’re thrilled to be a part of Community Connections and enjoy teaching the students about how important shoreline cleanup is for the environment and wildlife.”

In addition to engaging the nonprofit community and creating new partnerships for the University, Community Connections has become a staple in local towns, where many residents now look forward to seeing the students at work each year. Donning their signature bright yellow t-shirts, community members can’t miss the hundreds of students throughout the state planting trees, painting buildings and cleaning beaches.