10-8-2015

Toward a Greater Good: In the Heart of Providence, Celebrating Community-Engaged Projects

Public Affairs, Roger Williams University

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Recommended Citation
Public Affairs, Roger Williams University, "Toward a Greater Good: In the Heart of Providence, Celebrating Community-Engaged Projects" (2015). Featured News Story. 532.
https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news/532

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. – A month after the public launch of Roger’s Revolution – a bold new initiative to make a significant difference in Rhode Island’s economic future while equipping students with the experiences and skills that today’s employers demand – Roger Williams University gathered with community partners in the heart of the Capital City to celebrate the collaborative work of students and faculty in local communities.

Held at the Providence Public Library – the University’s soon-to-be neighbor, with its expanded campus at One Empire Plaza set for occupancy late next spring – the Community Engagement Celebration illustrated the myriad ways the University is fulfilling its innovative new core purpose – To Strengthen Society through Engaged Teaching and Learning – and singular goal – To Build the University the World Needs Now – to enhance the education of its students and make a meaningful impact in Rhode Island.
The beauty of community-engaged projects is that they serve both students and the greater community, RWU President Donald J. Farish told more than 250 presenters and guests. By integrating traditional, classroom-based teaching with intensive experiential learning, Farish says, these experiences provide graduates with vitally important marketplace skills and help communities solve real-world challenges.

“We are committed to having all of our students be part of a program of active, engaged learning,” Farish said. “In addition to benefitting from the opportunity to practice what they’re learning in the classroom, students give real value back to the community and learn the importance of working collaboratively, meeting deadlines, partnering with clients and doing all of the things that will be part of their world once they graduate. They also learn that what they do matters to people – and that’s important for the long-term. We know that many of our students will continue to be active in the community long after they graduate.”

The packed-house event offered a glimpse into 52 projects in which students and faculty partnered across the state and the region with nonprofits, municipalities, businesses and other community-based organizations – efforts that often serve entities with small staffs and lean budgets or enhance the capacity of partners to provide increased services to clients in need.

Some organizations, such as the East Bay Community Action Program – a nonprofit that facilitates a multitude of health and human services throughout the state, including the operation of the East Bay Coalition for the Homeless – work through numerous connections to the RWU campus to take advantage of the breadth of expertise available at the University for assistance on external projects. RWU Law students, for example, have assisted families in need with tax return preparation projects through the partnership with EBCAP and have provided instruction through the law school’s Pro Bono Collaborative on legal rights for family advocates and parents in the Head Start program.

“In the last five years we’ve returned millions of dollars in tax returns to the community, which is good for the families and good for the local economy,” EBCAP President Dennis Roy said at the event. “The law students have done a great job with us – we couldn’t have done it without them.”

Most recently, a project facilitated through the Community Partnerships Center saw a team of business students partner with the East Bay Coalition for the Homeless to create a comprehensive marketing plan to bolster fundraising efforts and to redesign its website.

“This service was instrumental for us because it allowed us to take a fresh look at what we do with this program,” Roy said about the project. “It helped the agency update the website, do some branding and get more involved with social media. And with the students’ help it’s been a great success in gaining revenues for us in various endeavors.”
One of the benefits of community-engaged work is that it allows students to immerse themselves in professional experiences before graduation, gaining not only workplace skills and a deeper knowledge of a particular discipline, but also the opportunity to evaluate whether the field is one in which they will thrive and feel contented.

Via RWU’s Business Partnerships Center, Amanda Harrison ’15 put her skills to the test as a student consultant to Absorbent Specialty Products of Cumberland, R.I., which landed the marketing major and graphic design minor a full-time position upon graduation as the company’s social media officer. The experience, said the Chatham, Mass., native, not only helped her determine that she enjoyed working in business marketing but also launched her career in the Ocean State—a clear-cut example of how community-engaged work can create connections to local employers and keep college graduates in Rhode Island, a key focus of Roger’s Revolution.

“I really got to immerse myself in the company and see what they do, without being an intern,” Harrison told the audience. “I was actually working on things that would increase marketing and sales—they were almost next to nothing on social media, and I’m happy to say we just hit 100 hundred likes on Facebook! The Business Partnerships Center is a really great program, and I’m now fully employed thanks to Roger Williams and to Professor [Joel] Cooper.”

While all students build real-world skills in these experiential education projects, many also emerge with personal insights and reshaped worldviews after working on complex social issues, according to Arnold Robinson, director of RWU’s Community Partnerships Center.

“Here’s a quote that I commonly hear from students who have finished work on a project: ‘I didn’t know I could have an impact on a real community issue. By working on this project I saw the ability for something to change, to get better,’” Robinson said. “And that is enormously valuable. It reaﬁrms to them that this is why I want to be a teacher or an engineer and provides that motivation in the midst of their college career.”

It’s important to celebrate this work, Robinson said, with events like the Community Engagement Celebration that allow guests to explore the different types of community-oriented projects at RWU—creating opportunities to establish new connections with community partners and open new avenues for partnerships with other academic areas.

“This kind of work for faculty and students takes more time, it’s harder, it’s messier and more frustrating than typical classroom projects,” Robinson said. “And we want to say thank you to those community partners, faculty and students who have worked really hard to make change in these communities while learning in a different way. They are the ones who make things happen.”