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Public Affairs, Roger Williams University

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Students Embark on Stay Break to Help Address Food Needs in RI Communities

A group of 17 students embark on the University's first Stay Break to help local nonprofits address prevalent community issue



RWU students prepare meals at the Mathewson Street Church in Providence. Image Credit: RWU

March 7, 2016 | Public Affairs Staff

BRISTOL, R.I. – This week, more than 130 Roger Williams University students, from undergraduate to graduate to law, are participating in Alternative Spring Break trips, where groups of students – often led by faculty and staff advisors – work in teams to lead volunteer projects aimed at improving communities or assisting nonprofit organizations.

One group of students will embark on the University's first Stay Break – a new program that mirrors the immersive, week-long service learning experience of alternative spring break trips abroad but allows students to stay on campus and serve nonprofits in nearby communities. The group, which includes 17 students, will lead volunteer projects focused on meeting food needs in Rhode Island communities by partnering with the Rhode Island Food Bank, East Bay Community Action Program, Sharing the Harvest Community Farm and Mathewson Street Church.

Students will also work alongside leaders of the Bristol Health Equity Zone (HEZ) – a program funded by the grant/cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and facilitated through the Rhode Island Department of Health to improve the mental health, well being and quality of life for Bristol residents with a focus on health – to evaluate Bristol food retailers and restaurants on the types of food items available to local residents, in addition to the placement, promotion and pricing of healthy alternatives. The students’ initial assessment will support the Health Equity Zone’s mission to improve access to healthy food for Bristol residents.

Bristol Health Equity Zone Project Manager Craig Pereira believes the RWU students’ involvement in the food-mapping project adds value to the program. “It’s great that we can get the RWU students involved and visible in the stores and in the community with business owners. Having the voice of the younger generation has been helpful to us in making us think about things that we may not have thought of and their insight is an interesting and thoughtful perspective.”

Following their volunteer work, students will have the opportunity to share their findings and experience with Rhode Island State Legislators to discuss how public policy may help address contemporary issues related to food needs in Rhode Island.

Roger Williams University sophomore Meagan Hackey has volunteered in her hometown of South Kingstown, R.I. for a number of years and looks forward to continuing her community involvement work on the Stay Break.

“I volunteer at my local church to help with a community dinner they provide each week to families that can’t always afford to put dinner on the table. I’ve seen how much food assistance programs can mean to people in need,” says Hackey. “I’m really excited about participating in the Stay Break and getting involved in larger initiatives related to meeting food needs like the food-mapping project and working with food pantries in the area.”

RWU Professor and Director of the University Honors Program Becky Spritz believes the assortment of majors represented in the Stay Break program – including education, marketing, biology, architecture, historic preservation and psychology, among others – offers a valuable contribution to addressing local community needs.

“There are a number of community engagement experiences on campus that are connected to specific majors or programs like public health or engineering, yet we know that so many of the needs that communities face are multidisciplinary issues,” says Spritz. “These are problems that are best tackled by putting minds together from different areas. We’re doing that by bringing together students from different programs and that’s really exciting.”



The Stay Break program is an academic, credit-bearing experience that fulfills the community engagement requirement for students in the honors program. In addition to their service work, students will lead independent research and create a local public service announcement addressing issues related to food needs in Rhode Island.