

## BEST PRACTICES

### **Princeton's 250 x 250 Challenge: Engaging Alumni in Community Service**

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**E**arlier this year at the convocation celebrating Princeton's 250th anniversary, Professor Burt Malkiel announced the creation of a Princeton Center for Community Service, a center that will provide the necessary administrative support to strengthen and expand the existing community service efforts of students, faculty, and alumni. Nearby, a new plaque lay in the ground in honor of Princeton's alumni for their role in helping to fulfill Princeton's tripartite mission of scholarship, education, and service. Throughout the entire convocation, from President Harold Shapiro's opening address to Toni Morrison's closing remarks, the speakers wove echoes of Woodrow Wilson's 100-year-old speech "Princeton in the Nation's Service" into their messages. Indeed, the occasion of Princeton's 250th anniversary has been an opportunity to encourage and strengthen the commitment of Princeton alumni to community service.

Two years ago when this Charter Day ceremony was only a thought, the Alumni Council Committee on Community Service decided that it wanted to honor the university's 250 years with a lasting legacy — a legacy that would endure long after the last guest had flown home from the anniversary celebration and birthday party. The committee, made up of a collection of alumni dedicated to encouraging Princeton's graduates to become involved in service and outreach, decided to issue a challenge that would strengthen and expand the commitment of alumni to serving Princeton's local and global communities. Just as community service has increasingly become an everyday part of life for most undergraduates, the committee wanted to promote the idea that being a Princeton alumnus also calls for consistent involvement in community and public service work. The 250 X 250 Challenge was born.

What does it mean, this nebulous phrase 250 X 250? The committee challenged alumni organizations all over the world, both

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regional associations and particular classes, to create 250 service projects by the end of the 250th celebration in 1997 (ongoing projects count as more than one). As its mission states, 250 X 250 was designed to recognize the capacity and the opportunity that Princetonians have to make a difference in the world through community service. We felt that a challenge would do two things: first, it would recognize existing service efforts among alumni; and second, it would encourage even greater participation in service projects among other alumni organizations.

Hundreds of alumni(ae) associations have organized, brainstormed, executed, and led these programs. Each member of the Alumni Council Committee on Community Service assumed responsibility for overseeing and supporting the projects of a few regional alumni associations or classes. As members of the committee, it has not been our job to organize projects, rather it has been our job to motivate, excite, and instigate.

We first sought particular alumni from our designated alumni associations whom we knew to be interested in community outreach. We did not need casts of thousands; one passionate person from each group was sufficient. We coached and/or supported these people — depending on their level of interest and expertise — as they set about the task of leading service projects. We encouraged our contacts to investigate community needs regardless of their past experiences and expertise, knowing that the projects we were seeking to encourage had to be defined by both the service recipients and the organizers. Occasionally we spent fruitless hours trying to locate potential contacts, but we also had our share of alumni calling us for ideas and resources. The easiest way to ensure a strong connection and relationship with classes and regional organizations is to encourage each graduating class and each regional association to simply appoint a community service chair. The position can then be handed down from generation to generation.

The committee also drafted an Alumni Community Service Handbook, a resource manual for both creating and managing projects. This manual includes several examples of existing programs, a set of "how-to's" and best practices, and the names and numbers of helpful contacts. Whenever we discover another alumnus willing to dive into the Challenge, we pass along our manual. Each committee member keeps records of his or her designated projects and sends these records to the two members who act as chairs for the 250 X 250 Challenge.

What have we done and what of our impact? The possibilities for service are infinite, and they are only limited by the imaginations and energy of alumni. Projects have ranged from a group of Austin, Texas, alumni who adopted a middle school to provide mentoring for its students to a sweater drive organized by the Princeton Club of New York. At its tenth reunion last May, the Class of '86 sponsored several service events including a book drive for a local after-school program, monetary support for summer service internships for

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Princeton undergraduates, and a Habitat for Humanity project in nearby Trenton. Reunion activities of this sort draw alumni back to campus who would not otherwise venture back for such an occasion. These activities were organized and publicized amongst classmates months in advance of reunions, and they also had the support of campus organizations such as the Student Volunteers Council. Don't underestimate the value to students, alumni, and community organizations of such partnerships between existing campus service groups.

Several other projects also leverage resources by forming partnerships between alumni/student groups. The Class of '49 established a partnership with its "grandchild" class, the Class of '99. Together the two classes decided to establish a mentoring program

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with junior high students at a nearby school. The Class of '49 members make the initial contacts with the schools and provide funding, while the Class of '99 members act as mentors and facilitators to the junior high students. In such a project the wisdom and resources of age are wedded with the enthusiasm and idealism of youth. Such a project also fosters connections between

alumni and current campus events. They become more enthusiastic and loyal alums because they are grounded in students' lives. Princeton's mission to educate and serve becomes real. It also affords students the opportunity not only to reach beyond the classroom and into the community, but also to catch a glimpse of life after Princeton.

These service projects, one by one, have helped to redefine what it means to be a Princeton alumnus(a). As the committee's mission states, "service is increasingly recognized by alumni as an effective way of addressing societal needs, as a meaningful educational experience for students and alumni, and as a responsibility carried forward from a Princeton education." The 250 X 250 Challenge has infused the desire to fulfill this mission with new energy. Particularly in an era when the service "third" of higher education's purpose (education, scholarship, and service) is de-emphasized, harnessing the energy and dedication of alumni to community service is essential. The Challenge has helped us to do this in ways that support existing projects as well as stimulate long-term interest in new community organizations. The goal, after all, was not only to involve alumni in one-time projects, but also to stimulate interest in lifelong community involvement.

The celebration of Princeton's 250th birthday was no doubt invigorating for alumni, staff, faculty, and students. What is more

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exciting, however, is that the 250 X 250 Challenge — an enduring celebration, if you will, of the university's commitment to outreach — was met with such enthusiasm, creativity, and dedication. Our goal of 250 projects has been reached and surpassed. Nevertheless, the Committee on Community Service is beginning to anticipate next steps as we continue to seek innovative ways to encourage community involvement. There are discussions and dreams of a 2000 x 2000 Challenge. Perhaps by then the Challenge would even be "housed" in the new Center for Community Service, a move that would no doubt strengthen the Challenge and provide support for new alumni initiatives. Regardless of future action, we do know that the 250 X 250 Challenge has truly served to renew and re-energize Princeton's (now expanded) motto "in the nation's service and in the service of all nations" in a tangible and lasting way.

### **About the Author**

Upon receiving a bachelor of arts in religion (cum laude) from Princeton University, Eleanor Harrison worked in the experiential educational and service-learning fields at the Santa Fe Mountain Center and at Honda Education Corporation's Eagle Rock School in Estes Park, Colorado. In 1995 she returned to Princeton to coordinate Princeton's largest student service organization, the Student Volunteers Council (SVC). The SVC sponsors sixty-five weekly service projects in nearby Trenton and Princeton for which more than 600 students volunteer. Additionally, the organization sponsors one-time Reach Out days, two educational awareness weeks, several community service break trips during each break week, a pre-orientation freshman week of service called Urban Action, two not-for-profit job fairs, and forty summer internships. Harrison also serves on the Alumni Council Committee on Community Service.