



Students in the Breakout Princeton trip “Dying in America: Exploring the Medicine, Policy and Ethics Behind End-of-Life Care” stop for a photo in front of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Photo by Josue Chirinos



Breakout Princeton Builds on 10 Years of **IMMERSIVE SERVICE LEARNING**

by Benjamin Gelman

What do wolves, hair politics, cancer, circus arts and end-of-life care have in common? Over fall break, more than 60 Princeton University students immersed themselves in these and other critical social issues affecting communities near campus and across the U.S. as part of Breakout Princeton and Breakout Local with the Pace Center for Civic Engagement.

Last November, students, faculty and community partners gathered for a celebration of Breakout Princeton at the Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding. The event brought together the groups that had recently completed Breakout trips to discuss their service, come up with plans to use what they learned and commemorate Breakout Princeton's achievements across 10 years of the program.

Born from a history of service trips organized through the Student Volunteers Council (SVC), Breakout Princeton emerged in 2008 after student leaders sought to find a more responsive model for break trips with a focus on learning. Over the last decade, 115 Breakout Princeton trips have traveled to 28 states and connected with more than 550 community partners.

"Breakout Princeton is incredibly unique because it is run by students from start to finish," said junior Jonathan Haynes, co-chair of the Breakout Princeton student board. "Trip leaders and participants are able to work within the service learning model to directly engage with issues relating to their passions and concepts of justice. In my personal experience, going on

my first Breakout trip inspired me to change my major. Leading a Breakout Trip empowered me to see through my ideas and build a skill set of team-building and accountability while also gaining deep friendships."

Fall Trip Learning

Proposed and planned by undergraduate or graduate students, Breakout Princeton trips begin long before fall or spring break. Through pre-trip meetings with Pace Center staff and faculty advisers, the teams aim to understand social issues from a variety of angles and connect with community partners and experts to learn more.

The five student-led trips over fall break 2018 were:

- "Complex Roots: Exploring the Intersectionality of Black Identity and Hair Politics in Professional Atmospheres," in Washington, D.C.
- "Dying in America: Exploring the Medicine, Policy and Ethics Behind End-of-Life Care," in Washington, D.C.

- "Inequalities in Access: Cancer Screening, Prevention and Treatment," in New York City
- "Social Circus: Using Performing Arts to Promote Youth Empowerment," in Trenton, New Jersey
- "The Return of Wolves to the Rockies: A Clash of Conservationists and Communities," in Gardiner, Montana

The "Complex Roots" trip investigated discrimination against black hair in the workplace and bias against certain traditionally black hairstyles such as dreadlocks, afros and cornrows. Junior Florence Odigie said, "We learned about how more black representation in media and professional spaces is needed to combat biases." The group also met with black Congressional staffers to discuss how hair politics affects their work lives and perceptions.

"The Return of the Wolves to the Rockies" trip delved into the complexities of environmental conservation through connection with stakeholders in a Montana community. Junior Juliana Jiranek stated, "Highlights included wolf watching and swimming in a boiling

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river.” Senior Benjy Getraer said the group discussed “the differences between conservation through active management and passive preservation, which is letting things take their natural course.”

Back on campus, students brainstormed how to continue their service experience in practical ways. Ideas included bringing speakers or community partners to campus, fundraisers or partnering with a student group to raise awareness for a particular issue.

Students were asked to write their ideas down and create a timeline with their peers for how to implement their post-trip plans. One group, “Inequalities in Access,” discussed sending thank you notes to community partners and designing stickers to spread awareness of cancer care options available for low-income patients.

Keeping it Local

Sophomore Kelton Chastulik was one of the more than 15 students who took part in Breakout Local, which offered students staying on campus during fall break the opportunity to engage with community organizations in the area.

Chastulik volunteered at the HomeFront Free Store in Trenton, which provides families with donated household and clothing items.



Members of the service trip “Inequalities in Access: Cancer Screening, Prevention and Treatment” help plant succulents for cancer patients at the American Cancer Society’s Hope Lodge program. Photo courtesy of the Pace Center for Civic Engagement

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Breakout Princeton service-learning trip to Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National Park. Photo by Benjy Getraer

“It’s incredible the amount of work that these local volunteers do every day just to support HomeFront’s mission,” he said. “I worked with volunteers who told their stories about how they got involved and why they believe their work is important. It was like one big family all brought together for the common good.”

Breakout Local participants also assisted Princeton Human Services in conversations with local residents about employee rights and wage theft, served as classroom assistants at Princeton Nursery School, served meals at Cornerstone Community Kitchen at Princeton United Methodist Church, learned about the history of Habitat for Humanity and the town of Princeton, and engaged in reflective conversations over lunch and dinner.

Celebrating 10 Years

Speakers at the Breakout Princeton anniversary celebration emphasized the program’s commitment to connection, exploration and respectful engagement.

“Connections are what Breakout is all about,” said Geralyn William, program coordinator at the Pace Center and staff adviser for the Breakout Princeton program: “The intentional community-building between participants, the elevation of community partners as

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I worked with volunteers who told their stories about how they got involved and why they believe their work is important. It was like one big family all brought together for the common good. — KELTON CHASTULIK

experts and educators, the bridging of social issues, academic interests and service. For the past 10 years, the Pace Center, students, faculty and community partners have built connections to each other and to furthering positive change, wherever they land on the map.”

David Brown, assistant director at the Pace Center and staff adviser to the SVC, said students developed Breakout Princeton with the goal of incorporating more service experiences throughout the academic year.

“Students realized that spending a week engaging with a place and its community could be a strong model for learning,” Brown said. “With a new approach focused on learning, the concept of trip proposals was opened to students across campus and the Breakout model was born.”

In 2008, the first Breakout Princeton trips examined the Navajo Nation, immigration issues in Arizona, urban education in Los Angeles, farmworker rights in Florida and children’s health care in New York City.

Charlotte Collins, associate director at the Pace Center, reiterated Breakout Princeton’s approach to service. “We believe service is more than an activity,” she said. “We believe that service is broad. We believe that service is a way of being.”

Collins outlined how Breakout Princeton prioritizes value-driven community engagement, and how participants “leaned in to learning about the concepts they had heard about in class through real-life experience.” Students, faculty and community partners at

the gathering also highlighted the transformative nature of the program.

Heather Howard, director of State Health and Value Strategies and a lecturer in public affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, shared how Breakout Princeton students who had been on a trip concerning the Affordable Health Care Act advocated for a course on that topic — one Howard is now teaching for the fourth year in a row.

Ben Thornton, director of outreach services at Anchor House, a center dedicated to assisting at-risk youth in Trenton, said Breakout Princeton emphasizes serving people in a way that honors their dignity and rights.

“When we learn from each other, our service is more whole. It maximizes learning on both sides of a human equation,” he said.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ben Gelman is a freshman at Princeton University from Houston, Texas, and works for the Pace Center for Civic Engagement as the Student Correspondent.

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