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# Exploring the Role of Alternative Break Programs in Students' Career Development

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## Abstract

Higher education institutions play a key role in helping to shape students' interests and career plans; as such, student affairs practitioners should understand how the co-curricular environments in their domain contribute to students' career development. The purpose of this study is to explore how one specific co-curricular experience, participation in an Alternative Break (AB) program, may influence students' career plans.

College is a time of exploration for many students as they seek to develop a sense of who they are, where their skills and interests lie, and what they plan to do with their lives. According to the Higher Education Research Institute's annual College Senior Survey, just over half of all students change their major and/or career interests between their first and senior year (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2013). As Baxter Magolda (2003) argued, higher education plays a key role in helping to shape students' interests and career plans; as such, student affairs practitioners should understand how the co-curricular environments in their domain play a role in students' career development.

One of the theoretical frameworks that can help practitioners think about the role of cocurricular experiences in career development is Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT). SCCT posits that learning experiences shape individuals' self-efficacy and outcome expectations in a particular area, which in turn influence their interest in that area. As Lent and Brown (1996) described, "emergent interest, self-efficacy, and positive outcome expectations in relation to a particular activity...promote goals for further activity exposure" (pp. 313–314). The more people feel a high sense of self-efficacy and expect positive outcomes from a particular activity, the more they are likely to choose to engage in said activity, reinforcing their sense of efficacy, outcome expectation, interest, and goals.

Research using SCCT has validated the theory that learning experiences are the cornerstone of this process, yet there is little research on how specific experiences facilitate career development (Schaub & Tokar, 2005). Although SCCT is a robust theory that could help student affairs practitioners better understand how co-curricular experiences influence students' career development, few (if any) studies published in student affairs journals have explored co-curricular

experiences through this lens. An understanding of the role of co-curricular experiences in career development could help practitioners better facilitate positive career decisions. The purpose of this study is to explore how one specific co-curricular experience, participation in an Alternative Break (AB), may influence students' career plans.

## Review of the Literature

ABs are opportunities for small groups of students to travel to a different city, state, or country to participate in a service-learning project during their academic break. Within one institution, students may have multiple AB options. Students may travel to Georgia to build houses with Habitat for Humanity, to New York to prepare meals for people living with HIV/AIDS, or to Bolivia to build an orphanage.

The literature on community service and service-learning broadly has identified a number of ways these experiences may influence students' career plans. Astin and Sax (1998) found that participating in community service and service-learning experiences was a positive predictor of students' plans to work for a non-profit organization, and Vogelgesang and Astin (2000) found that the strongest outcome of service participation was choosing a service-related career, independent of freshman year career choice. In their work on outcomes of service-learning experiences, Eyler and Giles (1999) found that service-learning was positively associated with wanting to have a career helping others and that individual program characteristics may lead to positive outcomes, including placement quality, connection between service work and academic content, reflection (both discussion and writing), community voice, and the opportunity for students to interact with people different from themselves.

A few studies on ABs, a specific manifestation of service-learning, have identified their potential to influence students' career plans. Ivory (1997) found that participants reported experiencing a number of challenges post-trip, including questioning of major and career choices. McElhaney (1998) similarly found that students in ABs reported broadening educational and career goals; for example, a pre-law student came to see the power of a lawyer working in a nonprofit organization and an architecture student saw how urban planning could benefit the community. In a case study of four short-term immersion programs, including three ABs, Jones et al. (2012) found that students reported exploring new majors or courses in which they could learn more about the issues they had come to care about, and changing career plans accordingly.

Despite the potential for ABs to influence students' career plans, the research on ABs consists mostly of single-program and/or single-institution case studies, limiting its generalizability. Although the qualitative nature of the existing literature provides insight into the experiences of students who participate in ABs, it provides little guidance for practitioners looking to create ABs that will influence students' careers. As the purposes of these studies were not explicitly focused on career development, they also lack a theoretical framework for understanding the role of ABs in career development.

## Theoretical Framework

SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) provides a theoretical lens through which to view the role of cocurricular experiences, such as ABs, in career development. Lent and Brown (1996) described:

Children and adolescents' environments expose them, directly and vicariously, to a variety of activities (such as crafts, sports, music, and mechanical tasks) that have potential career relevance... Through continued activity practice and feedback, children and adolescents refine their skills,

develop personal performance standards, form a sense of their efficacy for particular tasks, and acquire certain expectations about the outcomes of their performance. (p. 313)

The sense of efficacy gained and the outcome expectations developed from learning experiences then influence individuals' interests, goals, and actions.

SCCT is based in Bandura's (1982) theories of human agency and self-efficacy. Although these theories focus on individual agency in career development, they also recognize the role of contextual factors and individual characteristics in shaping experiences and decisions. Bandura (1982) described four sources of efficacy—performance accomplishment, vicarious learning, physiological and effective states, and verbal persuasion—all of which are relevant to how experiences influence career development. From participating in an AB involving volunteering in a legal aid clinic during an AB, students may find that they understand legal concepts (performance accomplishment), learn about jobs working in legal aid (vicarious learning), enjoy helping others (psychological and effective states), and receive encouragement from staff at the clinic to pursue law school (verbal persuasion).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

SCCT provides a lens through which to view the role of co-curricular experiences, such as ABs, in students' career development, but no large-scale studies have examined the influence of ABs on students' career plans. Few studies on ABs have identified the specific program features that may contribute to student outcomes, including career development. This study sought to answer two research questions:

1. How frequently and in what ways do participants in ABs report that their AB experience influenced their career plans? and
2. What specific program features contribute to students' reports of an influence on their career plans?

### **Methods**

Data for this study came from the National Survey of Alternative Breaks (NSAB), an online survey of over 2,000 students from 97 colleges and universities who participated in ABs during the spring of 2011. Sampling for this study occurred at two levels—the institution level and the student level. At the institution level, staff at Break Away, a national organization that works with member campuses to promote high-quality AB experiences on college campuses, provided a list of institutions with ABs, along with contact information for a staff person involved in the AB. From this list, a stratified random sample of 100 institutions was selected based on institution size, control, and Break Away membership, to insure a broad representation of different types of institution in the sample. Due to the relatively small number of students who participate in ABs at each institution, all AB participants at these institutions were invited to participate. The overall response rate was approximately 35%. Data for each institution were obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

The NSAB included questions on students' background and prior experiences, specific experiences during their 2011 AB (e.g., the extent to which they engaged in meaningful service, the frequency with which they engaged in reflection, etc.), and the extent to which they felt that their AB experience influenced their lives in a number of ways, including through their career

**Table 1.** Analytic Sample Demographics

		n	%
Class Level	First Year	299	19.8%
	Sophomore	446	29.5%
	Junior	406	26.9%
	Senior	304	20.1%
	Graduate Student or Other	57	3.8%
Gender	Female	1199	79.3%
	Male	313	20.7%
Race	African American	77	5.1%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	113	7.5%
	Hispanic	67	4.4%
	Multiracial	101	6.7%
	Other Race	24	1.6%
	White	1130	74.7%
Trip Location	International	259	17.1%
	Domestic	1253	82.9%

plans. The survey was developed based on a review of the existing literature on ABs and the related fields of study abroad and service-learning. Content and survey methodology experts reviewed the survey instrument, which was piloted with a small group of students who participated in AB programs in January of 2011. See Niehaus (2012) for more detail on survey development and data collection.

The analytic sample for this study was 1,512 students who had complete data for the variables of interest (described as follows). The original and analytic samples were compared on key variables to ensure that there were no systematic differences between the two groups. The only significant difference was in the trip location: the small number of students who participated in local AB trips (in the same general area as the college or university they attend) all had missing data and were excluded from the analysis. Basic demographics for the analytic sample are provided in Table 1.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Although SCCT provides the broad theoretical framework for understanding the role of ABs in students' career development, as noted previously, few studies using SCCT have unpacked the ways that particular experiences contribute to career development. In order to examine how a specific experience (i.e. ABs) facilitates career development, this study employed Astin's (1991) inputs–environments–outcomes (IEO) model to guide the analysis.

**Outcome.** The outcome of interest for this study was the extent to which students reported that their AB experience influenced their career plans on a scale of 0 to 4, with 0 being not at all and 4 being a great deal. All respondents answering something other than not at all were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with three statements: My 2011 Alternative Spring Break experience made me want to (a) change career plans completely; (b) stay with the same general career plans but alter them in some way to focus on helping others; and (c)

take time off after college (or graduate school) to participate in a volunteer program such as the Peace Corps, Americorps, Teach for America, or Doctors without Borders. These students were also asked to write in any additional ways in which their AB influenced their career plans.

**Distal environments.** The environments for this study were separated into two blocks—distal (or between-institution) environments and proximal (or program) environments (As-tin, 1991). Distal environments, including institution type, size, and control, were important to include in the model, following Cruce and Moore's (2007) finding that institutional factors were significant predictors of students' plans to volunteer. Cruce and Moore also hypothesized that students at institutions that demonstrated a consistent commitment to community service were more likely to volunteer; as such, the institution's commitment to ABs was added as a distal environment.

**Proximal environments.** Prior literature on ABs, international and domestic service-learning, and study abroad guided the selection of specific proximal environments of interest. Where appropriate, multi-item scales were developed using exploratory principle components analysis. A complete description of the variables, survey items, and scale reliabilities (where applicable) is provided in Table 2.

The first proximal environment of interest, placement quality, is a key component of service-learning and ABs, and includes the extent to which the program involves direct service, opportunities to work with community members, and the inclusion of community members in planning and execution (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kiely, 2005; Rhoads & Neururer, 1998). Engagement with diversity, through interactions with the host community, staff, or other students, is also an important aspect of students' AB experiences and is related to perspective transformation in service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones et al., 2012). Interpersonal interactions can also be an importance source of vicarious learning and verbal persuasion—research has demonstrated the importance of role models and relationships with others in career decision making (BarNir, Watson, & Hutchins, 2011; Brown, 2004).

In addition to the importance of role models, experiences that provide new perspective are important in the career decision-making process (Brown, 2004). ABs often provide these new perspectives through connecting the service experience to broader social issues (Jones et al., 2012), which Eyler and Giles (1999) found to be a significant predictor of perspective transformation and citizenship outcomes. Students are often able to make these connections through reflection, which is perhaps the most often cited characteristic of quality service-learning or ABs (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jones & Abes, 2004; Kiely, 2005) and may promote postgraduate career decision making (Brown, 2004).

Brown (2004) also found that challenging experiences were key in students' career decision-making process. Other studies have pointed to the importance of the intensity of an AB experience in facilitating learning, including the idea of "getting out of the bubble" (Jones et al., 2012), 24/7 immersion (Kiely, 2005), greater numbers of actual service hours (Cook, 2004), and the level of cultural difference between students and the host community (Malewski & Phillion, 2009).

Finally, what happens before and after the AB is also important in facilitating students' learning. Studies have shown that students must receive proper training and preparation for the trip (e.g., learning about the history and the culture of the place they will be travelling; Elble, 2009). When students return, they often face difficulties readjusting to life at home (e.g., feeling like friends and family cannot understand what they experienced during their AB; Ivory,

**Table 2.** Description of Variables

Construct	Variable	Description
<b>Inputs</b>		
Class Level	same	First year, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student
Prior Experience	Prior AB Experience	Yes or No
	Prior Community Service Experience (College)	How often students reported engaging in community service during high school and college
	Prior Community Service Experience (High School)	Yes or No
	Prior Study Abroad	Number of countries students reported travelling to outside of the U.S.
Gender	same	Male or Female
Race	African American	Five dummy-coded variables with "White" as the referent group
	Asian American	
	Hispanic	
	Multiracial	
	Other Race	
<b>Distal Env.</b>		
Institution Type	Associate	Basic Carnegie Classification; three dummy-coded variables with "Doctoral/Research" as the referent group
	Baccalaureate	
	Masters	
Size	under 1000 students	Four dummy-coded variables with "over 20,000 students" as the referent group
	1000–4999 students	
	5000–9999 students	
	10,000–19,999 students	
Control	Private/religious	Two dummy-coded variables with "Public" as the referent group
	Private/non-religious	

(continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

Construct	Variable	Description
AB Participation	Same	Total number of students participating in AB trips at the institution
	Break Away Membership Current Member Former Member	Two dummy-coded variables with “Non-Member” as the referent group
<b>Proximal Env.</b>	Placement Quality	Community Engagement
		<p>Five-item scale (alpha = 0.875) reflecting the extent to which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students worked directly with members of the community,</li> <li>• students were able to develop relationships with members of the community,</li> <li>• the community was involved in the design of the project,</li> <li>• the community was involved in the execution of the project, and</li> <li>• students felt that they were meeting community-identified needs.</li> </ul> <p>Six-item scale (alpha = 0.806) reflecting the extent to which students felt that they</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were making positive contributions,</li> <li>• had important levels of responsibility,</li> <li>• were active participants rather than observers,</li> <li>• engaged in a variety of tasks,</li> <li>• received input from on-site supervisors, and</li> <li>• were appreciated by on-site supervisors.</li> </ul>
Engagement with the “Other”	Physical Challenge	The extent to which students felt that they were physically challenged by their experience
	Emotional Challenge	The extent to which students felt that they were emotionally challenged by their experience
	Community Interaction	The frequency with which students reported interacting with community members
	Community Difference	The extent to which students felt that community members were different from themselves
	Community Learning	The amount that students reported learning from community members
	Staff Interaction	The frequency with which students reported interacting with host site staff
	Staff Difference	The extent to which students felt that host site staff were different from themselves
	Staff Learning	The amount that students reported learning from host site staff
	Student Difference	The extent to which students felt that other students on the trip were different from themselves
	Student Learning	The amount that students reported learning from other students on the trip



Connection to Social Issues	Social Issues	<p>Five-item scale (alpha = 0.844) reflecting the extent to which students agreed that they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• were able to see the larger context of the social issue addressed by their AB experience,</li> <li>• came to a greater understanding of that social issue,</li> <li>• were able to connect real people to that social issue,</li> <li>• were able to come to a greater understanding of the region where their trip took place, and</li> <li>• were able to connect what they learned in their AB experience to other things they have learned outside of the classroom.</li> </ul>
Reflection	Reflection	<p>Four-item scale (alpha = 0.822) reflecting the frequency with which students spent time as a group reflecting on their experiences, discussed the impact of their service work with other students or student trip leaders, or engaged in other activities as a group that helped them reflect on their experiences.</p>
Program Intensity	<p>Journaling</p> <p>Emotional Intensity</p>	<p>How frequently students wrote in an individual journal</p> <p>Four-item scale (alpha = 0.760) reflecting the extent to which students agreed that they experienced strong emotions, their AB trip was an intense experience, it allowed them to experience something totally new, and it caused them to re-examine their beliefs about the root causes of social issues.</p>
Service Hours	Service Hours	<p>The average number of hours students engaged in service each day of the AB experience.</p>
Location Similarity	Location Similarity	<p>The extent to which students felt that the location of their trip was similar to places they had been before</p>
Orientation and Training	<p>Comprehensiveness of the orientation experience</p>	<p>The total number of activities in which students reported engaging prior to their trip (out of 7 possible choices), including: learn about the mission and objectives of the organization with whom they were working during their AB trip; learn about the history or culture of the location they travelled to; receive training in skills that would be necessary for the project they would work on; learn about the social issue being addressed by their trip; discuss culture shock or cross-cultural communication skills</p>
Post-Trip Reorientation	<p>Comprehensiveness of the reorientation experience</p>	<p>The total number of activities in which students reported engaging after their trip (out of 8 possible choices), including: discuss their experiences with the other students on the trip, other students from their college or university who went on different trips, or others on their campus who were not part of the AB; or having been provided with information on reverse culture shock or encouraged to find ways to engage in future community service or service-learning activities, or to find other ways to build on their AB experience, either by some affiliated or unaffiliated with their AB.</p>

1997; Jones et al., 2012); reorientation sessions after study abroad experiences may be related to less severe reverse culture shock (Casteen, 2006).

**Inputs.** Studies using SCCT have identified race and gender as status markers that influence the learning experiences to which individuals are exposed (Lent & Brown, 1996). Prior learning experience play a role in SCCT, as the experience, efficacy, outcome expectation, interest, goals, and behavior and experience loop is iterative—experiences continue to build on one another. As such, it is not surprising that prior experience with community service and service-learning may influence whether or not students volunteer in college (Astin & Sax, 1998), and a variety of studies have shown that those students with prior experiences show less growth from study abroad or international service-learning programs than students who have never participated in such activities (e.g. Casteen, 2006; Cook, 2004; Marmon, 2007). As career interests tend to stabilize over time (Lent & Brown, 1996), class level was also included in the analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

To determine the frequency and ways in which participants report that their AB influenced their career plans, descriptive statistics for the outcome measure and the follow-up questions were calculated. Additionally, 434 responses to the open-ended question were coded in NVivo 9; codes were then grouped in order to identify common themes in students' explanations of the influence on their career plans.

Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used to identify the features of ABs that contribute to reports of the influence of students' AB on their career plans. Studies using the IEO framework analyze data using hierarchical linear regression, blocking input and environmental variables and comparing each block using the change in the variance accounted for in the model,  $\Delta R^2$ . Regression analysis is limited when dealing with nested data, which violates the assumption of independence of observations in linear regression (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). ABs are organized in specific trips, or programs—a group of students all travelling together to the same location and participating in the same service project. Within any university, there may be anywhere from 1 to 30 (or more) groups of students on AB trips to different locations. Students within the same program are likely to have similar experiences, and programs within the same university will also share similarities. This nesting of data could lead to an increased risk of Type 1 errors (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). HLM accounts for the interdependence of nested data, correcting the problems encountered in regression.

Two modifications were made to Astin's (1991) framework in order to adapt it to use in HLM. First, an adjustment was made to account for measurement of environmental variables at multiple levels of analysis. While each individual has a unique experience of the environment, that experience is influenced by the actual environment plus individual variation. Since there was no objective measure of the environment itself, the group-level aggregate of individual perceptions was the best approximation. Environmental variables could then be entered into the model in order from the most distal (Level-3 distal environments) to the most proximal (Level-1 proximal environments) to the student, consistent with Astin's IEO model. The second adjustment made to the traditional IEO model was necessary due to the fact that there is no comparable  $\Delta R^2$  statistic in HLM. HLM models can be compared using the change in deviance, which is a measure of the lack of fit between the model and the data (Luke, 2004). For each block of the model above, the change in deviance was used to determine if the addition of the variables in that block significantly improved the fit of the model.

To begin the HLM analysis, a one-way random effects ANOVA was used to determine the partitioning of the variance for each level. Next, predictor variables were entered at each level in a series of four HLM analyses: the first block contained only Level-1 inputs; the second block added Level-3 distal environments; the third block added Level-2 proximal environments; and finally, the fourth block added Level-1 proximal environments. This series of analyses allowed for the examination of the significance of individual predictor variables as well as an analysis of the overall model fit at each step. A significant reduction in deviance with the addition of another step of the analysis indicated that the variables added in that step, as a whole, significantly improved the fit between the data and the model (similar to the  $\Delta R^2$  in hierarchical linear regression). The last step of the analysis to improve model fit was used to interpret the significance of various predictor variables.

### **Limitations**

Noting a few key limitations of this study is important. First, this study employed a post-test-only design with no comparison group. Knowing whether or not the outcomes associated with ABs in this study are truly due to the AB is impossible, rather than some other factor (such as student predisposition to the particular outcome). The purpose of this study, however, was not to identify if ABs lead to particular outcomes but rather what about ABs may influence students' career plans. Second, this study only includes students' self-assessment of the influence of the AB on their career plans rather than an objective measure of career change. SCCT points to the importance of understanding career interests and intentions, and other research using SCCT has affirmed the importance of understanding interest as a predictor of future actions (Miller et al., 2009). The follow-up questions that ask students about the content of the influence of the AB on their career plans only capture a limited amount of information, most of which assumes that students did not already have career plans that would align with the purpose and goals of the AB. Finally, the literature has identified many possible outcomes of ABs, but this study only looked at one—influence on students' career plans. Although this is an important outcome, those variables that were found not to be significant predictors of this outcome are not necessarily unimportant in ABs; they simply were not related to students' career plans.

## **Findings**

### **Descriptive Analysis**

The descriptive analysis identified the frequency and ways in which participants reported that their AB influenced their career plans. The vast majority of students indicated that their AB had at least some influence on their career plans—89.1% answered at least “1” on a scale of 0 to 4. Almost half of the students (49.8%) indicated that their AB had a substantial influence on their career plans (answering “3” or “4”). In the follow-up questions, very few students (7.5% agree or strongly agree) indicated that their AB made them want to change their career plans completely. Many more students (68.9% agree or strongly agree) planned to continue with their prior career plans but wanted to alter those plans in some way to focus on helping others. Over half of the students (53.0% agree or strongly agree) indicated that they were considering participating in a volunteer program such as the Peace Corps or Americorps.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The free response item on the survey provided greater depth as to the ways in which the AB had influenced students' career plans. Consistent with the finding that most students did

not radically change their career plans after their AB, students frequently discussed the ways in which the AB confirmed or strengthened their existing career plans. One student explained that the AB “solidified my goals... Just saying it and spending a week immersed in service led me to realize, ‘Yes, this is indeed what I want to do with my life.’” For other students, the AB helped them explore new options within existing career plans, particularly in exploring ways to incorporate advocacy or service in their careers. As one student explained, “I previously had planned on attending medical school...After my experience working with HIV/AIDS and patients who had a hard time being able to pay for their care, I would like to work in poorer areas of the country.”

For some, the AB did change their plans radically. Often this was around the discovery of the existence of new career paths, as one student described: “It exposed me to a different route that I didn’t know I could take before. I found that I was incredibly interested in national parks.” Others were discouraged from prior career paths, either because they discovered a new path about which they were passionate, or they realized that their old path was not a good fit. As one student who worked with children during her AB described, “my experience that day led me to the conclusions that I don’t want to work with young children in the future. Instead, I hope to work with the elderly.” Other students, particularly those who had participated in international AB trips, reflected on their newfound desires to explore international career options.

Finally, a number of students who did not specifically alter their career plans commented on how their AB inspired them to continue to find time to volunteer outside of their jobs. As one student explained, “I want to stay on the same career path but to add in more volunteering and community service to my daily routine.”

### ***Hierarchical Linear Analysis***

HLM was employed to identify the specific program features that contributed to the influence of the AB on students’ career plans. The first step in this phase of the analysis was to determine the amount of variance accounted for in the outcome measure by each level of analysis (the intraclass correlation, or ICC). The random effects ANOVA demonstrated that 91.99% of the variance in the influence of the AB on students’ career plans was accounted for at Level 1, 3.70% at Level 2, and 4.31% at Level 3. Table 3 details the HLM results for the extent to which the AB influenced students’ career plans. All four blocks significantly improved model fit (Block 4:  $\Delta D = 31.851234$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The Block 4 results were used in interpreting which variables were significant predictors of this outcome variable.

Three input variables were significant predictors of the influence of AB on students’ career plans: gender, prior AB experience, and college service experience (CSSL). Men were less likely than women to indicate an influence on their career plans. Students’ prior experience had a mixed relationship with influence on their career plans: Students’ reports of the influence of the AB on their career plans was positively associated with prior AB experience but negatively associated with prior CSSL experience.

Two distal environment variables were significant predictors of the influence of the AB on students’ career plans. Students at associate-level institutions were less likely than those at doctoral-level institutions and students at religious institutions were less likely than those at public institutions to indicate that the AB influenced their career plans.

A number of Level-1 proximal environments were significant predictors of the influence of the AB on students’ career plans. Emotional challenge, staff learning, student learning, social issues, reorientation, and trip location similarity were all significant positive predictors of this influence. Students who indicated that these program features were a greater part of their AB

**Table 3.** HLM Results—Significant Findings

	Level-1 Inputs	Level-1 Inputs + Level 3	Level-1 Inputs + Level 3 + Level 2	Level-1 Inputs + Level 3 + Level 2 + Level-1 Environments
<b>Level 1—Inputs</b>				
Gender: Male	-0.309***	-0.308***	-0.259**	-0.208**
Prior AB experience	-0.257**	-0.271**	-0.266***	-0.227**
College CSSL	0.127***	0.126***	0.106**	0.102***
<b>Level 3</b>				
Associates		-0.492	-0.765*	-0.683*
Religious –		0.067	-0.259*	-0.231*
<b>Level 2—Environments</b>				
Emotional Challenge			0.252***	0.155*
Staff Interaction			0.123	0.177*
Staff Learning			-0.001	-0.154*
Social Issues			0.073**	0.060*
<b>Level 1—Environments</b>				
Emotional Challenge				0.109**
Staff Learning				0.129**
Student Learning				0.101*
Social Issues				0.031*
Reorientation				0.087***
Trip location similarity				0.037*
Deviance†	4948.689231	4939.199184	4800.206547	4627.378335
Parameters	16	27	47	66
Δ Deviance	63.46178***	9.490047	138.992637***	172.828212***
Δ Parameters	12	11	20	19

Unstandardized coefficients. Only variables significant in the last step of the analysis are included in the table; all variables in Table 2 were included in the analysis and are reflected in the number of parameters and deviance estimates.

† Empty model deviance = 5012.151008, parameters = 4.

\* p < 0.05 ; \*\* p < 0.01 ; \*\*\* p < 0.001

were more likely to indicate that their AB influenced their career plans. A number of Level-2 proximal environments (program-level aggregates) were significant predictors of the influence of the AB on students' career plans. The extent to which students as a whole felt the experience was emotionally challenging, interacted with host site staff, and learned about social issues related to their trip were all positive predictors of the influence of the AB on students' career plans. The extent to which students as a whole said that they learned from the host site staff was a negative predictor of this influence.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of co-curricular experiences as learning experiences to promote career development, specifically focused on ABs. The results of this study point to a number of ways in which ABs do play a role in students' career development,

particularly through reinforcing students' existing career plans. This finding is consistent with the iterative nature of career development reflected in SCCT (Lent et al., 1994), where individual learning experiences enhance domain-specific self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations, which in turn influence students' interests, goals, and future engagement in learning activities. The iterative nature of career development may also help explain the findings from the HLM analysis regarding students' prior experiences. Students who had more prior experience with community service or service-learning generally reported a stronger AB influence, reflecting that the AB helped students build on those prior experiences. The fact that prior AB and attending a religious institution (where students may be exposed to multiple service and social-justice oriented activities) were less likely to see an influence on their career plans indicates that there may be a dampening effect from similar experiences—rather than further enhancing career development, many similar experiences may not provide additional benefit, at least with regard to career development.

The results of this study also point to the importance of ABs providing new perspectives for students as they think about their career plans. Many students reported that their AB shifted their career plans in some way, and for a few, this shift was radical. This shift in career plans is consistent with Brown's (2004) finding that challenging experiences that provided new perspectives for students were important in their career decision-making process. This emphasis on the importance of challenging experiences is also reflected in the HLM analysis, where the extent to which students felt emotionally challenged and were able to connect their experience to broader social issues were both positive predictors of the influence on students' career plans.

Another key feature of ABs that predicted an influence on students' career plans was the extent to which they learned from host site staff and other students. This finding is consistent with previous research on the importance of role models in career development (BarNir et al., 2011; Brown, 2004). Bar Nir et al. (2011) argued that role models served as a contextual factor in SCCT and were important sources of vicarious learning and verbal persuasion in promoting career-specific self-efficacy. Within the context of ABs, role models may be serving as examples of alternate career paths and may specifically reinforce students' career interests during the AB. The fact that role models (host site staff and other students) were an important part of ABs as learning experiences may point to a more central place for role models in the SCCT model.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

As Baxter Magolda (2003) noted, career development is one of the "central mission[s] of higher education" (p. 235). There are a wide variety of activities and experiences that may influence students' career development, including ABs and other service-learning activities, many of which fall within the domain of student affairs. The results of this study provide a number of implications for student affairs practice. First, as noted above, many students returning from ABs may be wrestling with questions related to their career plans. Although only a small number of students are likely to be rethinking their plans, these students may need the most support and are most easily overlooked. Many students may be exploring more subtle shifts in their plans and may also need support in this process. Practitioners may want to partner with career services offices on campus in providing support and reorientation programming for these students, possibly through providing information on internships in the non-profit sector or connections to AB alumni who are working in service-related fields.

For practitioners looking to facilitate career development through ABs, the results of this study point to a number of key program features. Practitioners should seek to create programs that are emotionally challenging and provide opportunities for students to connect their experience to broader social issues. Of particular note is the role of host site staff in facilitating an influence on students' career plans. Practitioners should find ways to build in opportunities for students to interact with host site staff and learn about their careers, possibly by organizing specific times for host site staff to formally share their career paths with students or through inviting host site staff to participate in a few group reflection sessions throughout the week.

This study also points to a number of directions for further research. There is currently little research on the role of host site staff in facilitating student outcomes—more research should focus on exploring the role of these key players in the AB. While a significant amount of variance was accounted for at the institution level (4.31%), very few predictors included in this model were able to explain that variance. More research should focus on institutional factors that contribute to outcomes related to ABs. As students at religious institutions were less likely than those at public institutions to report an influence on their career plans, future research might explore different ways in which religious and non-religious institutions approach structuring ABs and the role of religion and spirituality in how students make meaning of these experiences.

Finally, since many students report subtle shifts in their perspectives and intentions, more research is needed to explore the role of ABs within the context of students' broader life journeys and developmental paths. Although intentions may be good immediately after the experience, when students face resistance, conflict, or even just the distraction of every-day life, they may not follow through with the ways in which they planned to act on what they learned through their AB. Future research is needed to determine the extent to which students follow through with their career plans related to ABs, and how practitioners can best support students in this process.

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