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Inspiring Active Citizenship Through Alternative Break Trips

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Inspiring active citizenship through alternative break trips

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HONORS PROJECT

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A Critical Analysis of the Alternative Break Movement

The alternative break movement is sweeping the nation. Alternative breaks are service trips, usually for college or high school students in which they spend a short time, usually a week, serving the community instead of spending their break doing what is seen as “normal”, like going to a beach or spending their break at home in front of the television. The alternative break movement has made quite an impact on the student body of many universities, colleges, and high schools, but is it making the impact that it hopes to on both students and community partners? This paper will analyze the alternative break movement and more specifically what it has meant for the Honors Learning Community at Bowling Green State University.

The alternative break movement

There has been much criticism for the alternative break movement stemming from various issues. Some of the major concerns have been lack of time to make a real difference and not enough consideration of the needs of the community served. On the first page of her article *Alternative spring break may not be best option for student volunteers* (2010), Rachel Dougherty explains that “students barely get to start a project before it’s time for them to leave”. This can be a problem in that students do not get to see the completed work. For them, this could be discouraging or could leave them with an incomplete understanding of the full picture. From the perspective of the community or the organization being served, leaving a project open may mean more work for them in the long run. It may also mean that the work in preparing a task for volunteers may be more costly than beneficial.

Alternative break trips may also be problematic if volunteers do not consider the needs of the community being served. In the article *Why you should consider canceling your short-term*

mission trips (2012), Darren Carlson argues that too often volunteers serve in order to feel good about themselves and completely ignore the actual needs of the community they come to serve. He gives examples of Christian volunteer groups going to Africa to build churches that are never used because the communities they were placed in did not ask for or want them. This type of “service” is more like imperialism in that those who go to serve impose their understanding of a group of people on those people, ignoring their culture, needs, and beliefs. It says to the community that these people believe they are better. While this can be the outcome of certain volunteer opportunities, it is rarely the intention. Though intentions may be good, they matter less when the relationship between volunteers and the community is broken and the community is left in unacceptable condition or feeling disrespected.

I completely agree with the issues that Darren Carlson and Rachel Dougherty share, but I think a conscientiously planned alternative break can overcome the obstacle of limited time and also be more sensitive of the community that participants will serve. To begin with, though alternative break trips may not be long, it is possible to empower students during a short period of time. Carrie DuPre (2010) served as a chaperone for two alternative break trips and witnessed growth in students and budding passion for civic engagement. Neither trip was more than a week, but both left an impact on her and the students that she served with. To create alternative break programs as that which Ms. DuPre participated in, Break Away, a non-profit organization that helps college students create alternative break programs, recommends that all alternative break trips have education and reflection as aspects of their trips. They recommend participants attend pre-trip meetings where they get to know each other and learn together about the social justice issue they will be addressing. By doing this, students understand why they are doing what they are doing. This education gives them context to put their trip in. The other aspect that will help students make sense of what they have accomplished is reflection. In American University’s

Guide to planning an alternative break trip (2013), it is written on page 33 that “an essential component of Alternative Break trips is debriefing and reflection time. Students should take this opportunity to process what they have been learning, seeing, feeling, and experiencing during the day.” Reflection should occur during the trip and after so that students may have time to really think about what they have done and what it means. Part of reflection and education is to analyze what role the service provided had in addressing the overall social justice issue and what students can do next to continue addressing the issue. While not all students will take this opportunity, some may choose to continue addressing it, meaning that for them the alternative break that they participated on was more than a seven day trip, but the beginning of a lifetime of dedication to addressing that issue or to service at large.

Time was not only an issue for students, but for the community served as well. In consideration of this issue and providing an unnecessary service, there is one piece of advice that should be followed. Robert A. Rhoads writes on page 130 of his book *Community service and higher education: Exploration of the caring self* (1997) “How we serve others and what we do in action with and for others needs to reflect what they desire and what they see as important, as well as our own abilities to provide different kinds of service.” This may seem obvious, but having earlier read about some of Darren Carlson’s experiences with ineffective volunteering, it is not always the case. One way to make sure that the service volunteers will do meets the needs of the community is to work with an organization in that community. If this organization was founded by members of the community or was inspired by voices of the community, is more likely to address the needs of the community. An example of this is the Blight Busters. This is an organization in Detroit, Michigan, started by John George a member of the Detroit community. After experiencing problems in his neighborhood with gang and drug activity in empty houses, John began to work with volunteers and the city to take down or repair some of these houses and

buildings and use those spaces to create local businesses, community gardens, and places for education and art programs. When a member of the community works with other community members to start an organization, it is much more likely to address the needs of the community.

Though not on the same level, another organization that demonstrates dedication to the community in which it serves is Appalachia Service Project. ASP was started by Reverend Glen “Tex” Evans in 1969 to provide home repair for families in need in Central Appalachia. Though Mr. Evans was from Texas, he had served for many years as a pastor in Kentucky before starting this organization. Now, though the organization is run by a mix of people from various places all over the world, the number one priority is to serve the people. Appalachia Service Project never imposes their services on anyone. If someone would like to have their home worked on, they turn in an application explaining what they need. Along with that, ASP strives to buy the majority of the materials it uses from local businesses in order to promote the local economy. While the concerns about alternative breaks that were stated earlier are incredibly important to consider, they do not mean that these trips cannot be beneficial to all involved.

Honors Learning Community alternative break trip

This spring, twenty-four students from the Honors Learning Community at Bowling Green State University traveled to Jonesville, Virginia with four faculty and staff members to provide home repair for families in need. The work done was through Appalachia Service Project, an organization that provides home repair to families in need throughout Central Appalachia. The trip involved two days of traveling and three days of service. Students were split into smaller work crews of seven which they served with each day. Projects varied from digging a drainage ditch to putting up siding. Each night students had evening gatherings in which consisted of lessons on Appalachian culture and on some nights reflection time. Before the trip there were four pre-trip meetings in which participants explored Appalachian culture, rural

poverty, and got to know each other. After the trip participants got together to reflect and write thank you cards to sponsors and some work crews continued to meet up.

Before analyzing the benefits of such a trip for participants, I believe it is important to also acknowledge the aspects of the trip that could have gone better or should be adjusted for the future. One factor of the trip that did not go as I would have liked it to was post-trip meetings. One post-trip meeting went well and was well attended, but I was the only person to attend the other. Post-trip meetings can be a challenge because participants have already attended the trip and may feel less of a tie to the group, or because it is also the end of the semester, do not have time to spare in between their classes and extra-curricular activities. While I understand this, I do think that post-trip reflection is important and should be promoted and utilized when possible. Since the Honors Learning Community will be creating a class that students can take to go along with their overnight trips, it may be easier in the future to have that expectation that students attend post-trip meetings. The grade is an extra incentive to inspire students to attend while the material at the meetings hopefully provides them with an experience that they are happy they did not miss.

In the future, I would also recommend working with a different organization. While Appalachia Service Project serves ethically and creates a program in which both the community and volunteers benefit, it is costly and does not leave much free time. With a different organization, it would be possible to serve them for a bit a longer at less of a cost and to have time to delve deeper into the issue at hand. It would have been nice to have time to explore the region a bit or to have an opportunity to speak with someone in social services in the area about poverty in Appalachia.

The trip was not perfect by any means, but it was successful in many ways. One goal for the trip was to meet some of the learning outcomes of Bowling Green State University. In many

ways this trip managed to do so. At times the outcomes met were by me as the facilitator of this trip, but usually all participants had opportunities to meet these learning outcomes. The first learning outcome that the university has for its students is that they leave with intellectual and practical skills. Within this category is critical and constructive thinking, communication, and engaging others in action. Participants were challenged before the trip to think critically about the assumptions and stereotypes they had or had heard from others about the Appalachian region and rural poverty. The students participated in a scenario activity in which they were given different situations and had to make a decision as to how they would react. This opened some students eyes to the systemic issues involved in rural poverty. Many discovered or were reminded that poverty is usually not a consequence of laziness but of oppressive and faulty systems. During the trip, participants got to use problem solving skills to complete home repair projects. For some, there was more problem-solving than others. One group had to put up siding on a house that already had siding (the old siding was damaged but could not be removed). They used their critical thinking and came up with a system of framing that permitted them to put the new siding on and make sure it was level and properly attached.

Another aspect of intellectual and practical skills is communication. For this project, the participants spent less to time on written communication, though I spent a lot of time on that. I had to e-mail participants, donors, the community partner, and my advisors on various occasions and be conscientious of whom I was addressing and how they needed to be addressed. I also wrote a template for a donation letter and wrote a trip manual to give a better idea of what is involved in leading a trip like this. In the future, to provide an opportunity for participants to work on their written communication skills, it would be fitting to have a pre-trip or post-trip meeting in which participants write letters to members of congress or to their state representative about any legislation that is in the works that would address the social justice issue that they

worked with during their trip. Though the participants rarely had the opportunity practice written communication, oral communication played a large role in the trip. Students not only communicated on a participant level, but also at times as facilitators. All participants were in committees and oversaw a factor of the trip. The two committees that had to present to the group were the culture committee and the team building committee. Oral communication did not only play a role in pre-trip meetings, but also during the trip. Without communication, none of the home repair projects would have been completed. Participants had to talk with each other to make a plan for how they would work, ask any questions that they might have, and to explain instructions. Each work crew had participants that communicate in different ways, so they also had to speak in a way that would make the rest of their crew feel comfortable and respected in order to avoid communication barriers, hurt feelings, or large mistakes at their worksites.

The last factor that BGSU considers to be part of intellectual and practical skills is engaging others in action. This is split into participating and leading. Considering the nature of this project and trip, all participants excelled at participating. They were involved in pre-trip meetings, construction projects, reflection and debriefing, center chores, and creating bonds with the families they served and the friends they served with. Not only did they participate, but they also lead some aspect of the trip. From team building to fundraising to educating on Appalachian culture, our participants lead presentations, fundraisers, and ice breakers. Some participants also lead without position. There were various occasions in which participants took ownership of construction tasks or reflection. I witnessed as some participants lead through their actions and words and made this experience more valuable for their peers.

Another learning outcome of Bowling Green State University is general and specialized knowledge. The greatest example of this is the construction skills students learned while at their worksites each day. Some learned how to paint, others learned how to use power tools, and some

learned how to hang underpinning on a trailer. More than this, they had an opportunity to interact with people of a different culture. Many students created bonds with the families that they served and had an opportunity in doing so to broaden their understanding of values, American culture, and poverty. Students learned that even within our country there are a variety of cultures that can be quite different but with respectful communication and a sense of compassion, we can still relate.

The final learning outcome that was evident through this trip was an increased awareness of personal and social responsibility. While this cannot easily be measured, the testimonies of some students assured me that this occurred. A friend of mine had gone on the trip because she wanted to support me. Her perspective upon leaving was completely different and she explained to me that now she understood why people serve. She said that before she had done it because it was expected and it looked good, but now she realized there are real people behind every social justice effort made. Participants also had the chance to give feedback in a survey and one shared “I learned that I want to devote my life and career to serving others. “I become passionate about people who are exploited and at a disadvantage and want to help them in any way” (personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Her comment leads us to the outcome that is currently occurring for some. It is integrate, apply, and reflect. Now that we are no longer in Jonesville, Virginia, participants must choose what happens next. For some, this may have been a one-time opportunity. They are grateful for the experience, but it ended then. Others will work to integrate what they learned from this trip into their daily lives and apply their new understanding of Appalachia and poverty in the classroom, in their workplace, or elsewhere. Reflection is a continued process that will occur with other participants, friends, family members, and anyone who will listen.

In conclusion, the alternative break movement can be flawed, messy, and damaging, but when done well can create an ethic of care and truly create change. Students from the Honors Learning Community learned a lot from this trip and can say that they have successfully reached some of the BGSU learning outcomes because of their experience serving with Appalachia Service Project. With proper training, conscientious preparation, and good communication between participants and with the community partner, alternative break trips can leave an impact on all involved and leave this world a little better.

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