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# An Exhibition in Student Leadership: The Academic Alternative Spring Break Experience

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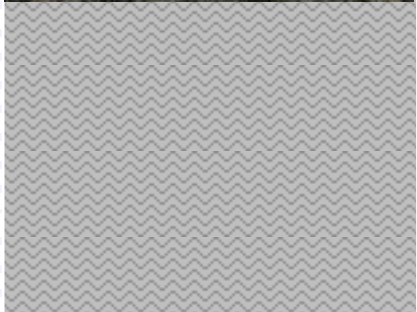
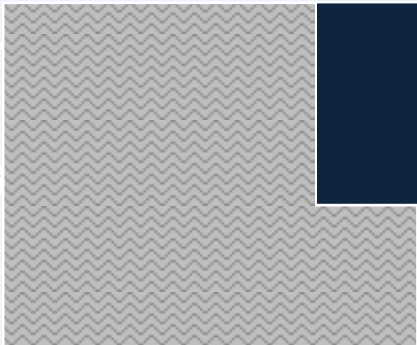
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# The Student Leadership Guide to Academic Alternative Spring Break

By: Elise Glidden & Ryan Kilpatrick

A guide for students to prepare for, plan, and execute a successful Academic Alternative Spring Break trip



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## INTRODUCTION

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When Elise and I first stepped foot on a Habitat for Humanity worksite, we knew we were a part of something special. It was the spring of 2009, and we were in Birmingham, Alabama for our first Academic Alternative Spring Break trip. Little did we know that our week in Alabama would change our lives forever. We also had no idea that merely 2 years later, we would be embarking on yet another AASB trip, but this time, as student leaders. Elise and I had become good friends in Alabama, despite being on separate worksites. We returned home to Rhode Island very energized and with a newfound passion for service. We needed a way to harness our energy and put our inspiration to the test.

When it came time to think about choosing our senior honors project, we realized that Academic Alternative Spring Break was the perfect vehicle for us to exercise our desire to serve. In the spring of 2011, Elise and I led a group of six students to work with the Eastern Shore Habitat for Humanity affiliate in Exmore, VA. Our endeavor was unique because it was the first AASB trip to be led by students at the University of Rhode Island. Our faculty advisor, Gail Faris, had expressed to us that the student-led trips would be the “wave of the future,” and if all went well, ours would be the first of many. Essentially, our project was the pilot program for the university. We needed to model our trip in a way that would allow future student leaders to follow our example. This inspired us to write this *Student Leadership Guide to Academic Alternative Spring Break*. The purpose of this guide is to help you successfully prepare for, plan, and execute an Academic Alternative Spring Break trip. We will attempt to cover every aspect of the process, and provide you with comprehensive instructions and suggestions to help you achieve your leadership goals. Throughout this text, we also describe some of our own experiences while in Virginia to help you visualize how all of the aspects we cover may materialize while on your trip.

Think of this guide as your own personal blueprint for building a trip that will both inspire you and challenge you. We want to help you realize that leadership qualities reside within all of us. We hope you find this leadership guide useful and informative, and that our words would provide the encouragement you need to take that first step toward becoming a student leader.



# CHOOSING YOUR SPONSOR

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## **You didn't think you would go it alone, did you?**

Once you have decided to plan and direct a student-led service trip, it is very important to have a member of faculty as an advisor. This faculty member should be both familiar with you and your partner, and have experience in leading, planning, or teaching a class involving Academic Alternative Spring Breaks (AASB). There are several different reasons for having an advisor in the first place. He/she will provide a kind of check system that will help you and your partner avoid forgetting important details about the trip; an advisor with experience doing AASBs will know the ins and outs of any type of service trip, and their experience will prove invaluable in the planning stages of the trip. Also, an advisor will function as a mentor for you and your partner. They should be able to answer questions, make sure that you and/or your partner are ready and capable of leading a student trip, and act as a general source of support throughout the entire process.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

For our senior project, Gail Faris was the first person that we thought of to be our advisor. Gail founded the AASB program here at URI, and has led spring break trips to several different locations throughout the past six years. She is well-versed in planning and leading trips, has taken and administered leadership and non-violence training, and is passionate about the field of social justice. Ryan and I also took the AASB class with Gail in the spring of 2009, so she was familiar with us, our capabilities, and our interests in service and education. But more than that, Gail was always willing to help us with the planning process, while simultaneously stepping back and letting us be in control of our senior project. She always believed we had the potential to complete a successful student-led trip, and once she had given us the tools of leadership training, her faith and trust in us and our capabilities to be effective student-leaders only increased. Any advisor you choose should be knowledgeable in the area(s) of your trip, but should also be supportive and encouraging throughout the entire process.

# BUILDING YOUR FOUNDATION

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## **Undergoing Leadership Training and Learning about Service Learning**

Being the leader of an alternative spring break trip is a daunting task, and being a student leader is quite another. This is why it is absolutely imperative to extensively prepare for such an undertaking. It is important to have a good foundation. Before you embark on your journey you must undergo leadership training, preferably with someone who has experience with AASB and with being a leader. Leadership training entails an array of activities, such as situational analysis, learning about our peers,



and discovering what it means to be a leader. Think of this training as an insurance policy. You hope you never have to use it, but you know you have it just in case it is ever needed.

So where to start? What would a good foundation consist of? A good place to start is experience. Veterans of an AASB program are good candidates for student leaders because they have been through the entire process. They have the best idea about what to expect before, during, and after the trip. But experience with AASB is not the only “good” experience. Experience in any kind of leadership position is also useful. Maybe you have coordinated a community fund raiser, or volunteered as a counselor at a summer camp, or coached a little league baseball team. These are all good experiences to draw from, and can substantially improve the quality of your student-led endeavor. So ask yourself: Have I ever been a leader of anything? Do I know what leadership means? These are great questions that lead us into the next element of our foundation.

Believe it or not, there are many different types of leadership. Learning about these different types of leadership may not be essential, but it certainly is helpful. Here are some examples:

- ✓ Charismatic Leadership: The charismatic leader gathers followers through dint of personality and charm, rather than any form of external power or authority
- ✓ Participative Leadership: A participative leader, rather than taking autocratic decisions, seeks to involve other people in the process, possibly including subordinates, peers, superiors and other stakeholders
- ✓ Servant Leadership: The servant leader serves others, rather than others serving the leader. Serving others thus comes by helping them to achieve and improve.

The most significant of these styles is that of the servant leader. People who fit this mold help others best by leading them. Ultimately, this is the type of leader we want to become, as it encompasses all qualities of leadership. Talk about the assumptions and the styles that follow these types of leaders with your advisor, and try to find which mold fits you best. You may discover that your leadership style incorporates many styles. Exercises like these help arm you with a better understanding of what it means to be a leader and what might be the best way to apply your skills. However, the foundation is not yet complete.

As a supplement to leadership training, it can be very helpful to find a text that highlights the different issues you are learning about. For example, a book about student leadership which includes specific examples of different situations can help with your decision-making analyses. Not only would such a book be informational, but it would also be encouraging. Here is where situation analysis comes into play. Situation analyses is how you would react to different situations you could encounter while on your trip. A good exercise is to have your advisor describe a certain situation and ask you what decision you would make to address the issue. For example:

- ✓ Q: While on the trip, one of your students receives news that a loved one has just passed away. What would you do?
  - Things to consider:

- How far away from the student's home are you?
- Would it be feasible to allow them to travel alone by bus/train/plane?
- What, if any, scenarios would allow the student to continue on the trip?

While this scenario may seem a little extreme, it is best to be prepared for such an event as there are a lot of uncertainties that surround a student-led trip. Have your advisor critique your responses to help you understand the best way to approach these issues, should they ever arise.

Another key element to add to your foundation is the subject of service learning. Service Learning is divided into three main topics: relevant and meaningful service in the community, enhanced academic learning, and inspiration of a lifetime of civic engagement. Why is this relevant you ask? It is important to understand why there is a need for service in the first place in order to make your experience more comprehensive. While all service is meaningful, it is simply more fulfilling when you couple service with academic learning. The following is a brief outline of service learning:

- I. Relevant & Meaningful Service in the Community
  - a. Relevant - bearing upon or connected with the matter in hand; pertinent
    - i. Irrelevant = Townspeople begging for better housing, and the town builds a playground (towns don't want it)
    - ii. Relevant = the most important aspect of relevant service is that people ask for it!
  - b. Meaningful - full of meaning, significance, purpose, or value; purposeful; significant
    - i. Not meaningful = Planting trees in the desert
    - ii. Not meaningful= building Habitat houses used as summer homes
  - c. Our Service with HFH = Both relevant and meaningful, Why?
    - i. Applicants have to demonstrate a need for housing - income, current housing situation, family dynamics
    - ii. Our labor contributes toward the effort of providing housing for a family in need
    - iii. The need for housing actually exists, service directly benefits families - better than anonymous donations, tangible results
- II. Enhanced Academic Learning
  - a. Why are we doing this service?
    - i. Some aspects of academic learning include readings about
      1. Absolute poverty
      2. The working poor
      3. Obligation of the rich to help the poor
      4. Ethical issues - mostly dealing with responsibility of more fortunate
    - ii. Applies to the people we will be helping, and service in general
    - iii. Supplemental learning activities/discussions
      1. Ethical discussion - Peter Singer article
      2. Income activity - budgeting for families with different levels of income, main question = how will they make it?

3. Food activity – those with the least make up the largest group, should the smallest group with the most help those larger groups below?
- III. Inspires Lifetime of Civic Engagement
- a. Gaining the realization that one time “band-aid” solutions aren’t as effective as permanent changes in thinking, acting, and doing
  - b. The goal of service learning – to obtain a passion and energy for future service
  - c. Remember: “Service is a marathon, not a sprint.” *Ric McIntyre*

Now that your foundation is established, you are ready to move on to another crucial part of your student leadership experience, that being actually planning the trip.

## PLANNING THE TRIP

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### The Nitty-Gritty of What You’ll Be Doing and Where

When planning and organizing an alternative spring break trip, one of the first things you must consider is the organization that you’re going to be working for. The organization that you ultimately choose will depend on locations, the price of volunteering, and whether or not they will be able to accommodate a group of 8-15 students and organize enough work to last for the entire spring break week. It is also important to have quick and effective communication with the host site; people who return phone calls and emails in a timely and helpful manner will most likely be reliable and cooperative during your actual spring break trip. When it comes time to actually register with your chosen site for spring break, it is *extremely* important to be aware of deadlines and registration procedures. Some sites may have spatial limits, and another group may prevent you from signing up with your first choice site. For these reasons, and several other considerations that are often uncontrollable, it is important to have at least one back up site should the first fall through.

#### *The Exmore Experience:*

For our trip, the first consideration was already taken care of; the Honors Colloquium had been working for Habitat for Humanity for several years and it has proved to be a well-structured organization. Also, HFH runs a Collegiate Challenge program that is specifically geared toward college students who are volunteering their time during their spring break. Once the Habitat affiliates who were hosting Collegiate Challenge groups were posted on the main website, Ryan and I had to narrow down the affiliates while considering several important factors: location, the recommended affiliate contribution, and how many students the site could accommodate for one week. We ultimately chose Eastern Shore Habitat for Humanity for several reasons. First, it was within a day’s driving distance, which provided students with a lower-cost trip option. Second, the recommended donation was \$125,



which was the lowest of all the fees that we researched, again providing an affordable option for students. Eastern Shore HFH also had enough space for 20 students, and since we were only a group of eight, it provided the opportunity to work alongside a group from another university. While this particular affiliate may have looked good on paper, it was still important to contact them, among others, before making a final decision.

We had narrowed our choices down to three affiliates, and Eastern Shore HFH had an informative website, helpful staff members that answered all our questions, and fit all of our other requirements. You also have to feel comfortable with the site/organization you ultimately choose; it will be one less thing to worry about come time for the trip, and your reassured attitude will undoubtedly rub off on the students you are leading. Ryan and I felt that Eastern Shore HFH was a perfect fit for our trip, and we turned out to be right; the staff members were welcoming, the host church was extremely accommodating, and the construction site workers were patient, informative and helpful. When it came to the actual registration date, which was several months before the actual trip, we followed the registration guidelines provided on the Collegiate Challenge website. Once registered, we had to be sure to send in a monetary contribution within ten days that would hold our spots for the week, and a confirmation form which included the names and ages of the students who would be volunteering. Without completing these steps, our registration would not have been complete and our spring break trip would have been in danger of being cancelled.

## CHOOSING YOUR LABOR FORCE

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### Selecting the Students Who Will Accompany You on the Trip

There are many things to consider when selecting the students who will accompany you on your trip. This part of the process is crucial for a few reasons. First, you will be spending an extensive amount of time with these people and you want to ensure that they are both willing to be led and agreeable. Secondly, construction can be hard work, and it is important to select individuals with a good work ethic. It is a very good idea to conduct pre-trip interviews with all potential candidates. This way you can evaluate their individual qualities and weed out any possible bad eggs. Important areas of focus include attitude, demeanor, personality, past experience, and interview skills. During the interview, make sure to convey to the candidates how difficult an AASB trip can be. Ask questions like:

- ✓ Have you ever encountered less than ideal sleeping arrangements?
- ✓ Are you able to function on a very limited amount of sleep?
- ✓ Have you ever been subjected to intense physical labor?

Questions like these help the candidates understand that AASB trips can be very unpredictable, and that they need to be flexible. In addition, it is important to find out why the students are interested in participating in AASB. Ask questions like:

- ✓ How did you hear about the class/trip?
- ✓ What interests you about a spring break service trip as opposed to one in the Caribbean or Florida?
- ✓ What are some of your past service experiences?

Pay particular attention to their responses to these questions, as they will help you determine who would be the best candidates to participate in your student-led endeavor. Another important aspect to consider is the financial situations of the applicants. If your trip offers a considerable cost advantage over other service options, then those students with financial need are good contenders for joining you. Lastly, consider where the students live. Students who reside in-state are probably the best candidates because you can arrange for everyone to meet at a central location before embarking on your trip. If you have chosen to fly to your service site, then it is not absolutely necessary to travel together, and thus student residences do not need to be heavily considered. Once all these things have been taken into account, choose your labor force. This process is so imperative because it will help you make the best decision about who you want to lead.

## THE BUILDING PROCESS: SPRING BREAK

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### Putting Your Leadership Skills to the Test

#### *Setting the Tone*

You've made it. Everything we've covered up to this point has prepared you for the most important part of your Academic Alternative Spring Break: the actual trip. This trip will be a culmination of all the hard work and effort you've dedicated toward being a student leader. From the very beginning of the trip it is imperative to establish your role as the primary authority, but it is equally if not more important to also exemplify yourself the very characteristics you would expect the other students to exhibit. A student leader should be fair, respectful, cooperative, flexible and inclusive. The goal is to get the students to recognize and respect your leadership position so that you can establish an environment that fosters communal decisions. Essentially, you are responsible for creating a positive atmosphere that will set the tone for the entire week.

#### *The Exmore Experience:*

Because our spring break trip was in conjunction with a class, we had already established ourselves as leaders through our roles as teacher's assistants. However, before we even started up the van and began our trek to Virginia, it was important to maintain the same leadership role. Because of our leadership training with Gail, we knew that it was important to establish a leader among equals attitude that enabled the students to feel comfortable with us and with contributing their opinions to

the decision-making process. We believe that our students fed-off of our sociable personalities and our passion for the purpose of our trip. We were very blessed to have a group of very outgoing individuals who were immediately receptive to the standards we set for the trip.

### *Making Decisions*

The role of being a leader comes with the responsibility of making decisions. However, you do not have to go it alone. Don't forget your partner when it comes time to make a decision. Discussing possible alternatives with your partner before making a final decision is more effective and beneficial to the cohesiveness of the group. If your group members see you making individual decisions without discussion, it can create a division and ultimately work against the positive environment you worked so hard to create. This process should be reserved for important administrative decisions, such as:

- ✓ What time to leave for the worksite each morning
- ✓ The sequence of events after work: showering, shopping
- ✓ Planned and modified extracurricular activities as work schedule changed

However, not all decisions are reserved for the executive office. For instance, the students should be allowed to decide where they want to eat, as long as all the needs of the group members are met. Extracurricular activities after work can also be organized by the group. These types of decisions further the inclusive atmosphere.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

Once we had established our positive, respectful group dynamic it became apparent that we could make most decisions through group discussion. The students that we took with us recognized our roles as leaders, which allowed us to feel more comfortable including them in the process. By doing this, we were able to further the inclusive and democratic atmosphere of our trip. However, there were still situations that required us as student leaders to take charge and initiate the appropriate course of action. We encountered both types of situations on our day off. Before we left, we had planned to visit the Black History Museum in Richmond, VA to enhance the educational experience of the trip. However, when the first workday was cancelled due to inclement weather, and the site supervisor offered us the opportunity to work on our day off, we had to decide whether or not to forgo the trip to Richmond and exercise the option to work. Since the visit to the Black History Museum was an essential part of the trip learning experience, we decided that it was best to form a compromise; we offered to come early and leave late for the remaining workdays, while still maintaining an educational experience. However, we deliberately left the second half of our day off unplanned, so that the students would be allowed the opportunity to choose what we did as a group. While it was important that we as student leaders made the decision regarding the actual trip to the museum, it was equally important to make the students feel as though they had some control over certain aspects and activities of our trip.

## ***Being Responsible***

When you took on the role of student leader, you assumed an immense responsibility. This thought can be very overwhelming, as the lives of the students you lead are essentially in your hands. You are where they turn first. You are responsible for feeding them, driving them around, informing them, and meeting their needs. It is important to always remember that you are a leader first, and a friend, mentor, or whatever else you choose, second. Think of yourself as both supervisor and agent: you must constantly be alert to the happenings of the trip, and you must also act on behalf of your students when the time arises.

### ***The Exmore Experience:***

Throughout our week in Virginia, Elise and I shared the responsibility of driving the van. We did a considerable amount of driving to and from the worksite, to the local Walmart, the YMCA, and also to Richmond, VA during our day off. We were responsible for ensuring that all six students were fed for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, which required nightly trips to the grocery store to purchase food. A few times we had to make impromptu stops at Walmart, to fulfill the incidental needs of the students. While on the worksite, we had to make sure that all our students were exercising safe work practices, and attend to those who may have suffered any kind of injury. Every day before we left for work, we made sure that we informed the whole group about the day's events, and announced any changes to the schedule as they arose. By doing this, we made sure that everyone in the group was both mentally and physically prepared for the day. In short, we made sure that our efforts were centered on taking care of our students in all capacities.

### ***Communication...***

...Is absolutely vital:

- ✓ Between you and your partner
- ✓ Between you and your students
- ✓ Between you and your advisor
- ✓ Between you and your host site

#### ***Between you and your partner***

One of the most important characteristics of a student-led trip is constant communication, within and throughout all levels of leadership. As we described in the decision-making process section, effective communication between you and your partner is vital; without it, the two of you as a pair will be perceived as unorganized and under-prepared for the trip. However, a mutually supportive partnership that fosters and encourages thoughtful communication about all decisions and situations will result in a successful leadership endeavor.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

On our spring break trip, decision making was not the only process that required effective communication between Ryan and I. Towards the end of our second day, one of the leaders of the Drexel group who was working with us approached me about an issue. The night before, we had planned to prepare and have dinner together, but the difficulty in coordinating showers and food shopping at separate locations resulted in a miscommunication about when we would be eating, and our groups ate at different times. During the Drexel group's reflection time later that night, some of their volunteers expressed discontent with the fact that we did not all eat together, as they had been looking forward to it after an entire day of fellowship and getting to know one another. When their trip leader approached me about this the next day, it was important not only to make sure that they understood that we did not mean any harm by eating separately, but also that we took steps to reconcile the situation. That same day we planned to prepare and have dinner together on Friday, the last night of our trip, and made the effort to include a specific time, as to avoid the miscommunication that had taken place earlier.

Since their trip leader had only approached me about this situation, I had to be sure to inform Ryan about what had happened. As it was not necessary to discuss in front of the students, Ryan and I had a private conversation during which I told him about my discussion with their trip leader, our collaborative effort to avoid future miscommunication, and our plans to eat together on Friday night. It was important for both of us to be informed about this situation, in order to maintain the mutual respect that had already blossomed between our two groups.

### *Between you and your students*

Effective communication between you as the leader and the students you are leading is absolutely essential to the success of your trip. Keep in mind that communication can be both verbal and nonverbal. It is just as important to portray a positive and approachable attitude through your demeanor as it is through your words. It is also important to establish an effective two-way communication system in which the students can voice their concerns and opinions to you. You want to create an environment that ensures:

- ✓ Everyone is on the same page
- ✓ Everyone's opinion matters

Some tips for making this possible:

- ✓ Setting up specific times each day for group huddles or discussions
- ✓ Making sure everyone eats together, not allowing for any "drifters"
- ✓ Meeting individually with group members to discuss how they feel about the trip



### *The Exmore Experience:*

A few times during the trip we were approached by group members individually to discuss a particular need they possessed. One of our students wanted to find a laundromat so she could wash her clothes. We gladly stopped at a local laundromat, which unfortunately was uncooperative. Then, we made extra stops at the local Walmart and made sure this student had enough clean clothes to last throughout the week. Another student informed us that she had given up eating meat for Lent, and so took her needs into consideration when we decided where we ate and the types of foods we prepared for meals. We made sure that we purchased appropriate foods for all meals, even if it was completely separate from what the rest of the group was having. We feel that these examples are a testament to the encouraging atmosphere that had existed from the beginning of the trip, because students felt comfortable approaching us about their individual needs.

### *Between you and your advisor*

Don't forget your advisor while you are on your trip. There is a reason why you chose him or her in the first place. Make a time to speak with your advisor on a daily basis and use this time to reflect on the day's events, voice any concerns, ask questions, or just share a laugh. Your advisor is there to help you and they can provide you with valuable wisdom to help you get through the week. Think of your advisor as your safety net, as you may be faced with a situation that you do not know how to handle on your own.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

While we were sojourning in Virginia, our advisor Gail was leading her own group of students in Birmingham, AL. We designated a set time every night to talk to Gail on the phone. During this time we shared our experiences on the worksite and our plans for the evening, and also discussed any issues we faced during the day. We also used this time to allow Gail to talk to our entire group, which was accomplished by simply putting her on speakerphone. We looked forward to our conference calls with Gail each night, as it was comforting knowing that she was looking out for us despite being miles away.

### *Between you and your host site*

No matter which service organization you may choose for your alternative spring break, it is imperative to establish and maintain communication between yourself as a student leader and the host site. Before you even leave for spring break, you should already have spoken to a volunteer coordinator about what time to arrive, where you will be staying, necessary forms and waivers, and any other information that will be pertinent for a thorough preparation. This initial contact with a representative from the organization will also perhaps be the first impression they get of you and your university, thus it is always important to be respectful and cooperative. The service organization is

your first resource in planning the trip, and will be instrumental in determining whether or not your trip is successful, so you have to be sure to create and sustain a positive working relationship.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

Once we had registered for our spring break trip with Eastern Shore Habitat for Humanity in Exmore, VA, we had to contact their volunteer coordinator, Susie Jones. She proved to be one of our most important resources, both before and during the trip. In order to work for Habitat for Humanity, each volunteer must submit a waiver form that releases Habitat of any legal liabilities should the volunteer get injured while on site. A student cannot even step onto the worksite without this waiver, so it was imperative that each and every one of us had filled it out prior to the first work day. Luckily, Susie had sent us this form, along with several others, far before our trip, so we were adequately prepared well in advance. Also, Susie sent us information about where we would be staying, procedures for showering at the local YMCA, a typical work week schedule, and a general history of Eastern Shores HFH.

Since this was the first time that any of us had worked with Eastern Shore, this information was extremely valuable as we embarked into unknown territory for our first student-led trip. But communication with our hosts did not end before the trip. While we were in Exmore, we had several last-minute phone conversations, both with Susie and the members of the Drummondtown Baptist Church where we were staying, about trivial things like the location of light switches and where to meet Susie to collect forms on the first day. While we did not have a keen sense of what to expect, the information that Susie and the members of the church provided gave us a unique sense of comfort and assurance that would not have been possible without effective communication.

### *Group integration*

- ✓ Intra: integrating our own group
  - Inclusion is the main idea, no one gets left out
  - No groups within the group
- ✓ Inter: integrating with the other group

Another vital component of having a successful trip is promoting inclusion (cohesion) within your group. This attitude of inclusiveness (cohesiveness) begins with those who are in leadership positions, but also needs to be practiced by the group members themselves. From the very beginning, as you have learned in your leadership training, you must make every effort to ensure that all members of your group feel included and comfortable in anything and everything you may be doing, such as going out to eat, playing card games at night, and having dinner together. Comfort levels are different for each individual person, and it is your job as a leader to recognize those students who may be more timid than others, and make continual and additional attempts to include them. This method of including all members of the trip will also prevent small cliques forming within your own group. Students will hopefully learn from the example you have put forth, and begin to make their own efforts to ensure that no one is left out.

During your trip, you may also be accompanied by another service group from a different university, church, synagogue, etc. If this is the case, it is advisable to make contact with the trip leaders before even meeting them face to face. The same guidelines that apply for communication with the host site apply here as well. It is important to be courteous and respectful, as you will most likely be sharing a living space with this other group for a week, and it would not behoove you and the purpose of your trip to start out on the wrong foot. This same consideration should be extended to your partner group during the trip as well. When you first meet them, introduce yourselves immediately, both to give a good impression and to establish yourselves as the leaders and the people they should go to should there be an issue or question. Also, your actions will signal to your students that, just as it is important to include all of your own group members, integrating with the members of another group is beneficial as well. The presence of another group also offers opportunities for new friendships, connections at other universities, and other positive relationships, so treat it as such. This initial connection will be helpful on the worksite, as it is important to know everyone's names if you happen to need help with a difficult task. And perhaps just as important, connections between the two or more groups who are living together will provide for enjoyable socialization and fellowship off the work site.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

When we first embarked on our road trip to Exmore, VA, both Ryan and I had previously met the six students who were coming with us. However, we had only spent time with them during our two-hour, once-a-week class, which does not particularly provide opportunities for getting to know one another on a personal level. When we left campus early that Sunday morning, it was obvious that there was a sense of reservation among the students; that, however, completely changed by the end of the week. While Ryan and I were lucky to have some outgoing students on our trip, we believe that the group members also fed off of our friendly and extroverted demeanors. We made every effort to include each of our six students, and found that throughout the week, the students were making similar efforts with each other. It also did not hurt that we all had to travel in one van and were constantly together, so that there were no opportunities for cliques to be formed. By the end of the week, there were lists of inside jokes, nicknames for everyone, which included "Mom" and "Dad" for us student leaders, and a general sense of love shared between people who began the week as mere acquaintances. The cohesiveness and connections that emerged by the end of the trip were evidence to the fact that a group of eight completely different people are able to bond deeply and form a kind of family in the short time period of just a week.

During our spring break, we were lucky enough to be joined by a group of 11 students from Drexel University. When we all arrived on Sunday afternoon, it was necessary for Ryan and I to introduce ourselves as trip leaders and begin to get to know our fellow volunteers. That night, one of their leaders, Miguel, had organized an ice-breaker game to provide an opportunity to learn everyone's names. This initial activity proved to be a great one, as it gave all 19 of us an opportunity to become acquainted with one another, as well as share a few laughs. The rest of the week progressed just as it had began and both groups learned to work together on the Habitat build sites, as well as socialize afterwards. There were countless new games that were played, magic tricks shown, meals shared, and

a whole lot of Just Dance 2 for the Wii. A majority of the time we spent in Exmore, on and off the worksite, was spent with this group from Drexel, and we were fortunate enough to bond and form friendships with another 11 students, all while working towards the same goal of giving a family their own home.

### *On the Worksite*

The worksite can be a very dangerous, high risk environment and so it is absolutely essential that the group leaders establish the proper etiquette for being on the worksite. First and foremost, it is important to get off on the right foot with your site supervisor. Secondly, it is imperative to establish the standards of work for the week. Always maintain a positive, can-do attitude, and make sure to encourage all group members to get involved. Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty! If your students see you rolling up your sleeves and working hard during the day, they will surely follow suit and you will be amazed at how much you will accomplish. On a side note, the same rules that apply to the worksite apply to your temporary residence. Remember that your good name is on the line, and so you want to make sure you keep the kitchen and common areas clean and tidy. You want to leave the place in better shape than it was when you arrived.

### *The Exmore Experience:*

During our stay in Virginia, we had the privilege of working on three different worksites. Two of the sites consisted of merely the foundations for the houses and the third site was an enclosed house awaiting drywall, plumbing, roofing, and electricity for completion. Each site posed its own risks and provided a number of different tasks. We were responsible for building the driveway on the first site, which required extensive tilling, shoveling, excavation, and spreading of gravel. Since we had missed the first day of work, it was important for us to promptly get to work so as to make up for the lost time. Our site supervisor, Glenn, briefed us each morning about our goals for the workday, and provided instructions before work began and throughout the day as they were needed. Since there were a limited number of tools on each site, we had to share responsibilities so that everyone could get involved and contribute. The students gladly obliged, and everyone remained busy despite the circumstances. By the end of the week, we had accomplished all the tasks Glenn had given us, and helped three different families become one step closer to moving into their new homes.

## CONDUCTING POST-TRIP REFLECTIONS

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### **Evaluating What You Saw and Trying To Make Sense of It All**

So your spring break trip is completed, and you are back at home after a wonderful week full of hard work, laughter, and many life lessons. It can be difficult to readjust to normal life, which is why it is now absolutely vital that you debrief. Since you will probably be on an emotional high, it is in your



best interest to make time to talk about your experiences with other people, namely, your advisor, your peers, and your students. Find a time to meet with your advisor first, as he or she likely knows the best questions to ask to help you articulate your thoughts. Tell them everything: what you ate, what kind of work you did, what games you played, the songs you sang in the car, how exhausted you are, what you liked, what you disliked. This is your opportunity to get everything out in the air so you can analyze it and make sense of it all. Afterward, make sure you dedicate a reflection time to your students, as they will have a lot to say as well. They will undoubtedly still be very excited, so allow them some time to wind down before you reel them in for serious reflection. Try to establish a structure for the first reflection rather than allowing for open discussion. Center this first dialogue on three questions:

- ✓ What did you see?
- ✓ How did it make you feel?
- ✓ What are you going to do about it?

Allow each of your students to answer individually and then allow them to talk with each other. Feel free to include your peers in this first discussion as well, as you may be surprised by the insight they provide. One of the main goals of your trip was to inspire a lifetime of civic engagement, and so it is important to talk about your plans for service in the future. Encourage students to get involved with their communities in some capacity, and make sure to emphasize that all service is good. Students tend to get overwhelmed by the social injustices of the world and feel as though they are powerless to make significant change. This is not the case, and it is your job as the leader to help them understand that small acts of goodness are key to achieving big change.

In conjunction with your post-trip reflections, you may be asked to evaluate the service organization you worked with during spring break. Be prepared to answer questions about your experience with your host site. For example, Habitat for Humanity sends a post-trip survey to all volunteer leaders. Since Habitat survives on volunteer labor, they take these surveys very seriously, and you should as well. Be honest in your responses, but be sure not to burn any bridges. If the organization was a wonderful host, tell them! If there is need for improvement, tell them, but be sure to be respectful and always say how you were able to overcome any deficiencies. These post-trip evaluations may be your last impression on your host site, and should always reflect your gratefulness to them for having you.

## Final Thoughts

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**W**hen Ryan and I returned from our first Academic Alternative Spring Break in Birmingham, Alabama in the spring of 2009, we were different from the people who had boarded south-bound planes just a week earlier. A passion for service and the energy and will to take action in order to change the injustices in the world were perhaps the two most important souvenirs that we brought back to Rhode Island. Two years later, when we found ourselves about to embark on another AASB as student leaders, we were excited about the opportunity to exercise our passions and



values, but were unaware of how this trip would change our lives even further. We were looking forward to forming relationships with our students, and expected the strong resurgence of a dedication to service that would inevitably come at the end of the week. However, new friendships and revitalized passions were not the only things that Ryan and I took away from our trip to Exmore, Virginia. All of the work we had put into our senior project, from leadership training to planning the minute details of the trip, combined with actually leading a group of six students for a week resulted in intangible souvenirs that will never be forgotten. In a practical sense, Ryan and I know exactly how to effectively plan an AASB trip, and those skills will prove valuable no matter where our future careers take us. There is the knowledge that we helped three different families to get ahead in the world by assisting in building their houses, which provides a unique sense of pride and joy. We have also gained confidence in ourselves and our leadership capabilities, a quality that will undoubtedly benefit all areas of our lives.

When we were telling friends, relatives, professors and others about our senior project and plans for spring break, a common response was, "It's so wonderful that you're giving up your vacation time to volunteer and help others." Now that we have returned and had time to reflect on everything that has happened in the past ten months related to this trip, we are very much concerned, not with the time we had to give up in order to lead and volunteer for spring break, but rather with what this spring break experience has given us. Among many other things, this AASB has given us leadership skills, practical knowledge about planning a trip, unforgettable memories, and most importantly, wonderful friendships. Just as Ryan and I were changed two years ago, the student leaders that came back to Rhode Island at the end of spring break were not the same people who left at the beginning. Our advisor who provided us with necessary training and invaluable advice, the wonderful students we led on the trip, the people we met while in Virginia, the Habitat for Humanity staff who encouraged us, and the houses we helped build were simultaneously building us, as concerned citizens, confident leaders, great friends, and people with character and integrity. We are forever grateful to have been given this opportunity to lead, serve, and love in Virginia and Rhode Island, and it is our greatest wish that whatever Academic Alternative Spring Break experience you choose will yield the same results. We hope that you have found this preparatory guide to be helpful and informative, and do not be reluctant to allow this experience to change your life; we are confident in saying that it will be a change for the better.



Wishing you the best of luck on your endeavor!



*I try to say goodbye and I choke...*