

On Ethics and Alternative Breaks: Commitments for High-Quality Alternative Break Experiences

“This is a lot of work.”

Meaningful service-learning (whether credit-bearing or not) requires effort. It’s about “Walking Our Talk”: If we want to create meaningful service opportunities that provide insight into social justice issues and the meaning of democracy, we need our trips to reflect those values. Here are our **Commitments for High-Quality Alternative Break Experiences**:

“We’re Not Going To Save the World Today.”

We need to recognize the value of short-term intensive service-learning projects, but be aware that they are not going to bring about radical change. This doesn’t mean quashing our enthusiasm, but rather entering into our projects consciously and without expecting to “fix everything, in one day.”

Be Ready.

Pre-trip preparation with host sites should include conversations about what tasks will be required of volunteers, and all volunteers should receive training on those tasks where appropriate. (e.g., if we’ll be maintaining trails, practicing with tools is a good idea.)

Build a Long-Term Relationship.

Alternative Breaks range from one weekend to several weeks long, and while they almost always create a lasting impact on the participants, we also want to feel like our service is going to truly be useful to the community. How will this experience lead to a sustainable partnership? Long-term partnerships with host organizations help to leverage our impact, and ensure that we’re truly meeting community needs as the members of that community define them.

Community is a Priority.

Build a community within the group, before, during and after the trip. We don’t have to like each other, but if we can get along things will be MUCH easier on everyone.

Intend to Know Each Other.

For community partners, group members, and institutions: high quality, ethical service comes from relationships, and relationships can’t happen without knowing each other! Work together. Listen to each others’ stories: shared humanity is profound—and our service can be too if we recognize it. Honor diversity, respect each others’ traditions (both with the community we are visiting and within our team), and establish cross-cultural relationships. This means respecting cultural differences, too.

Make it Accessible and Satisfying.

Keep alternative breaks affordable for *all* students, and find ways to provide assistance for students in need. Emphasize direct service. While we know that work in offices or “behind-the-scenes” is vitally important, direct service (i.e., working in the community, directly with people) makes for a more meaningful alternative break experience for most participants.

Stay Safe.

Health and safety are critical to a successful service experience! This means having clear guidelines and expectations regarding travel safety, alcohol and other drug use, expected work and safety equipment to be provided, and safe and secure housing.

Think and Talk About the Tough Questions.

Be aware and conscious of our language and attitudes. How are we being perceived? Some things to think about: What kinds of power and privilege structures are reflected in our service? How does our relative privilege affect the relationship with the people we’re trying to help? Can outsiders or visitors really help a community or does change have to come from within? How can we avoid pushing our values or our way of life on those we are working with? How can we avoid implications of condescension or imperialism?

Bring It Home.

Often, when students return from their service experiences, they remark on how “lucky” they are—how much privilege they enjoy. But it’s not about luck, and we need to recognize power and privilege—and how our behavior as members of our home communities can contribute to that stratification. While some students come back and remark on how “lucky” they are, others remark that the people they met did not seem unhappy—and how can one be happy if they don’t have what we have? We need to look beyond questions of “luck” and examine what truly makes people happy to re-examine our values.

We need to make commitments to bring our experiences—and what we’ve seen—back to our communities and make long-term changes in our lives. Ideally, our break experiences will lead to increased *local* involvement in our home communities.