

ALTERNATIVE BREAK SERVICE TRIPS

The world as classroom

By Carrie DuPre

TODAY'S STUDENTS want to change the world. Correction—today's students *are* changing the world. I've seen students on my campus take bold "what if?" thoughts and turn them into action plans for affecting positive change—proving that millennials are capable of working together to make their world a better place.

Even as we understand how our millennial students learn in such different ways than previous generations (watching how-to videos downloaded from YouTube or engaging in experiential learning adventures), colleges still rely heavily on in-the-classroom learning. I can't offer an alternative to this classroom format (sometimes it simply makes the most sense), but I do suggest that we continue to broaden our view of where learning can take place.

One such place is on the alternative break service trip, where students trade in the traditional classroom

for an experience that takes them beyond campus. Students might sign up for these trips as a fun alternative to going home over a fall or spring break, or for a way to meet new people while "doing some good," but they soon discover what educators knew all along: these trips are outstanding opportunities for student learning. As the advisors for these trips, it is our privilege to use this "real world classroom" to do what Norleen Pomerantz highlighted as a necessary challenge for Student Affairs professionals: to shape the learning environment in such a way that demands engagement through modeling our own actions and supporting the actions of our students.

In 2009, I served as the Clemson University advisor/chaperone for 18 students on an alternative spring break trip to Nashville, Tennessee, and for 15 students on an alternative fall break trip to Columbia, South Carolina. Both trips were amazingly successful

and rewarding; I realized the impact a small group of students can make on a community, as well as the importance of using new environments to foster student learning. I saw through the eyes of these students what made the most impact on their experiences and what methods of learning were most effective—namely, the relationships formed with each other and with the people they served—and the opportunities for leadership.

The first major theme students shared with me involved the importance of creating relationships with each other, which allowed students to feel comfortable enough to be themselves and to open themselves up to new learning experiences. Preparations for each trip included get-to-know-you activities planned with the intention of helping the students form relationships with each other before heading out on the trips—which include a lot of togetherness and doing just about everything together (including sleeping side-by-side on the floor of a church in Nashville or in tents while camping in Columbia, riding for hours together in rented vans, and cooking for each other at night).

Establishing a comfortable and supportive environment through the formation of these relationships proved extremely beneficial in allowing students to open themselves up to new ideas, and the bonds have lasted long after the vans brought them back to campus. In the words of one student, “The best thing about this week was definitely meeting all the people who went on the trip with us. I came in knowing three people and came out having 18 really good friends.”

The second major theme was the importance of relationships with those whom the students served. Students learned not only about themselves through their interactions (how can you really know how you would act in a certain situation unless you actually do it?), but also about the world beyond their campus walls. In Nashville, students sat down with homeless men to learn about their journeys through life. Students also played football with teens who

live in the state’s custody and heard women’s stories about overcoming addiction and starting a clean life. In Columbia, students created such strong relationships with the women at the shelter we served that we couldn’t leave until the women and the students exchanged hugs and personal words of gratitude.

The students do a better job of emphasizing the impact of these relationships on their learning than I ever could.

One female student, after reflecting on the multiple service sites we visited over spring break, said, “Everywhere we went, we formed a relationship of a different level. There were a lot of relationships formed within our group, and then with every site we helped out we got to work with the people who were served by that ministry, and through forming relationships with them we could just learn to think beyond ourselves to their position.”

And from a male student who was apprehensive about entering a home dedicated to helping women overcome addiction and trauma in their lives: “One of my favorite parts about this trip was getting to meet the people that are going through these programs. For example, yesterday we met two women that have gone through difficult situations and are now trying to get their feet back on the ground, and it was really great just to hear their stories and to talk to them and put a name and a face to the people that are actually using these services.”

A third major theme I observed was how students grew through their leadership abilities. I say “observed” because a key lesson I have noticed from these experiences is that students might be able to

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perform the actions of selfless leaders but they seem hesitant to raise their hands when asked “Who here is a leader?” What they do for these trips is undeniably leadership: students collect their own funds and plan their own trips. Planning includes deciding what projects to conduct in what towns, figuring out who to task with what pieces of the puzzle, how to recruit students, and every other little logistical detail (transportation, food, lodging) along the way. While the student who volunteered to get up at 5:30 a.m. in Nashville to start breakfast would say she was only serving others, wouldn’t this act qualify her as a leader? College students might have a difficult time articulating their leadership abilities, or even recognizing that anyone without the title “president of something” can be a leader; these service trips give us great opportunities to help them recognize that their actions are actions of leadership.

Beyond the relationship building and leadership exploration that happens on these trips, a great deal of personal growth and discovery also takes place. Being the adult guide for students in such a developmentally active stage of their lives can seem like a daunting task. (I will admit to moments of panic when packing for both trips, thinking of traveling with a number of 18-to-22-year-olds!) Still, my best advice for anyone embarking on a journey like this is to let the students know that you are there for them, and that you care. Make every effort to let the students know you trust them and that you view your role as one of support. And remember that actions speak louder than words; show the value of teamwork and service by serving beside them.

The concept of service is one that all university professionals can embrace, on these trips or back on campus. Even if just one educator travels on a service trip, the entire university can become involved in keeping the learning going. Once back on campus, have the students give presentations on their

experience to their peers; collaborate with faculty to incorporate service learning in their syllabi for these and all students; and encourage the students to conduct research about social issues they witnessed. There opportunity to help students reframe what it means to “do service” also exists; we can help the students break down their larger service trip into smaller acts of service that they can repeat every day on campus. These large trips are wonderful, but let’s keep this spirit of caring alive once classes are back in session: *Did you stock shelves at a homeless bank? Let me help you research homelessness in our community and find ways you can get involved locally. Did you have*

a conversation with a woman who felt alone in her addiction recovery? Let me challenge you to find a neighbor in our community who also feels alone and strike up a conversation. We can help frame service as centered in the spirit of caring, not in the size of the act.

One definition of learning, as articulated by Norleen Pomerantz, continually guides my view of student learning on these service trips and on campus: “to learn is to act; a learner must do something in order to learn” (p. 179). I also agree with Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King that students must take an active role to “explore what [they do] not understand, working to see the ‘big picture,’

realizing that knowledge evolves” (p. 1). These concepts are central to the work many educators do everyday, yet unless we help students connect their actions to what they think and believe, the opportunity for learning might be lost.

Organized reflection exercises help us maximize those opportunities; take time to ask students to reflect upon their thoughts and feelings, using questions about what they learned, how their ideas were challenged, how their experiences fit into the larger community, or how a given activity will change their future behaviors. On our service trips, some nights we could not “do reflection” until 11 or 12 at night, but we made

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sure this intentional, verbal processing took place to ensure that students connected their actions with new knowledge of the world around them.

Usually, many of the intentional reflection activities focus on positive experiences, yet those are not the only experiences from which students learn. Sometimes spending long hours with the same people in very intense environments can lead to stress. That stress can manifest itself as arguments or conflict—experiences not easy for students to deal with,

even if it is simply conflict over what to have for dinner or how to divide students between two vans. Stress and conflict are not exclusive to student trips, just as reflection activities are not valuable only on the road. After seeing their value on these trips, I now try to incorporate reflection-type questions in workshops and classes to help students actively process in their learning. Simple reflection questions can go a long way to encourage connections between service and learning, including: “What did you learn today that will change

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how you act tomorrow?” or “How is what you did today important to the people of this community?” or simply “What surprised you today?”

Through reflection, one student on the Nashville trip offered a very eloquent example of what she learned about the way her service experiences impacted her perceptions of the world around her, and I can think of no better final thought to summarize the value of these trips: “No matter what, there is always something you can do to help another person,

no matter what their situation is or what your situation is. There is always something.”

NOTES

- Baxter Magolda, M., & King, P. M. (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship*. Herndon, VA: Stylus.
- Pomerantz, N. K. (2006). Student engagement: A new paradigm for student affairs. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 25(2), 176–185.

