

## ***Alternative Break Programs: From Isolated Enthusiasm to Best Practices***

### ***The Haiti Compact***

Jill Piacitelli, Molly Barwick, Elizabeth Doerr, Melody Porter,  
and Shoshanna Sumka

#### **Abstract**

Alternative break programs, which are short-term service-learning trips, immerse students in direct service and education, resulting in the creation of active citizens who think and act critically around the root causes of social issues. Over the last 20 years, domestic alternative breaks have effectively created strong community partnerships and fostered student development. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, universities around the United States were seeking opportunities to offer “hands on” aid, and the need for best practices to avoid potential pitfalls of international volunteerism became plainly apparent. In response, a small group of alternative breaks professionals from five U.S. universities came together with Break Away (the national alternative breaks nonprofit organization), to form the Haiti Compact. The Compact developed best practices for international alternative breaks, allowing staff and students to overcome potential harm done to communities while contributing to student learning and engagement. This essay shares those practices and their application to work in Haiti.

#### **Introduction**

**H**enri Dunant, contemporary of Florence Nightingale, became one of the world’s first international humanitarian aid workers, inspired by witnessing the carnage of a battle in 1859 (*Polman, 2010*). He reactively gathered together a group of volunteers and “doled out soup, wrote farewell letters to families on behalf of dying soldiers, and patted blood-encrusted hands comfortingly” (*Polman, 2010, p. 4*). Dunant and his party meant well, but in the end remained “isolated enthusiasts” making “dispersed efforts.” Experiences in modern-day international volunteerism often reflect both Dunant’s reactionary approach and his subsequent conclusions. A group of well-meaning foreigners are compelled by empathy to assist people facing the aftermath of a tragedy—or merely circumstances less fortunate than their own. Many times, their “help” makes little difference, and the volunteers’ enthusiasm diminishes through exhaustion and feelings of futility.

Such groups of young, idealistic humanitarians are common on college and university campuses across the United States. They are often active in alternative break programs in which students travel locally, nationally, and internationally to conduct direct service while focusing on targeted social justice issues. Alternative break programs have been grappling with ethical issues of student service work, especially in an international context, for several years. These issues are most prevalent in relief work that allows little time to perform appropriate needs assessment based on community input, and volunteer enthusiasm ebbs quickly. These challenges were seen both in a domestic context post-Hurricane Katrina and internationally after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. In these situations, university groups typically understand the challenges facing a community in need of disaster relief through the media rather than as seen by the community itself, and galvanized, well-intentioned university students offer “help” to “fix” these communities for just a short period of time based on this skewed perspective. Additionally, because of accessibility, university groups typically rely on large, international “community partners”—generally non-local third-party volunteer service organizations (such as Cross Cultural Solutions, Global Volunteers, United Planet, Projects Abroad)—to determine how to address these local issues. Staff from these organizations often speak English, their mission draws attention through a flashy website, and they define community need in terms that students can easily understand and fill. Such organizations make hands-on assistance to these communities possible for young, idealistic college students.

Relying on non-local partners, in which the community voice ultimately comes from headquarters in the United States, or on a quick and fragmented or reactive assessment of need, presents a real dilemma for ethical international engagement by universities. Who should we listen to, and how can we proceed with sensitivity to real community need given our limitations of time and distance? Additionally, the short-term nature of the projects where volunteers swoop in to “help” and then just as quickly return to the comfort of their home community raises questions about the positive impact of such experiences. How do universities ensure that students’ well-intended efforts translate into sustainable and effective service, rather than a superficial fix? Do short-term volunteer immersions make a positive impact, or do they cause harm? Are universities’ efforts isolated or too dispersed? Do student volunteers lack the necessary knowledge and experience to deliver adequate service work? Does service become a burden on some of the most ravaged communities? Beyond the physical exhaustion

inherent in some volunteer work, how do universities fight the even more harmful exhaustion of volunteers' attention span?

This essay will explore these questions for university service programs. The authors are campus professionals who work with alternative break programs. Through the lens of alternative breaks, this essay will provide practical suggestions for best practices in international service projects, and as a case study, will describe and reflect on experiences working together with Haitian organizations. Moreover, it will flesh out and show the key elements and values in a unique type of collaboration, the compact model—a best practice for university-based international service.

### **Alternative Breaks Defined**

Student-led service initiatives, now known as alternative breaks, began in the late 1980s and early 1990s as part of an overall surge of interest in institutionalizing community service on college campuses (*McHugh, 2004*). On an alternative break, a group of college students (usually 10–12 per trip) engage in volunteer service in a community away from home, typically for a week to three weeks, during time off from school (students' fall, winter, spring, weekend, or summer school breaks). Alternative breaks fit within the category of short-term immersion experiences, which also includes study abroad (*Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, & Cilente Skendall, 2012*). The term “alternative” originated with college students who wanted to differentiate these experiences from “traditional” spring break travel. Although not much has been written about alternative breaks specifically, the pedagogical model is consistent with critical service-learning, which promotes education through a social justice lens (*Bowen, 2011; Doerr, 2011; Mitchell, 2008*).

The aim of alternative breaks is to contribute volunteer hours to communities in need through an asset-based approach, and to positively influence the life of the alternative breaker. Through these activities, alternative breakers gain the knowledge and experience to become “active citizens,” a term used throughout alternative break programs to describe those who take educated steps toward valuing and prioritizing their own communities through their life choices. On campuses across the country, alternative break participants return and immediately go into action: they create campus organizations related to the social issue, raise funds for the nonprofit organization with which they worked, and commit to internships within the nonprofit sector. For many participants, this deepened commitment to volunteering in their local community leads to a shift in their academic path.

### **National snapshot of alternative breaks.**

Alternative break trips focus on a particular social issue, such as (but not limited to) poverty, education reform, refugee resettlement, or the environment. As of 2012, the average campus alternative break program organizes 12 trips in which close to 150 students spend their breaks performing more than 5,200 hours of community service (*Break Away, 2012*). The exponential reach of this is significant. Most alternative break trips are led by students who, for several months prior to the trip, have engaged in a training course that focuses on leadership and social justice education. Topics include reflection facilitation, conflict management, non-formal curriculum development, communication, and asset-based approaches to volunteerism. Break Away, the national alternative breaks organization, estimates that in 2012, more than 68,000 students went on alternative spring breaks alone (not including other break periods), contributing more than 622,000 service hours. With this number of people involved, the impact of young people working toward positive change in their communities is significant.

Alternative breaks are defined by their use of the “Eight Components of a Quality Alternative Break” established by Break Away: education, orientation, training, strong direct service, reflection, reorientation, social justice and diversity, and being drug- and alcohol-free (*Break Away, n.d.*).

### **Alternative breaks as critical pedagogy.**

Through education, community partner orientation, and skill-specific training, students learn about relevant social issues in the weeks leading up to the break, as well as the context in which they will be serving and the hard and soft skills required for their work. To this end, the student leaders plan issue-based educational sessions that focus on a variety of topics, including the sociocultural history of the region or country, background of the organization(s) with which students will work, and language skills. Additionally, students engage in pre-trip reflection activities in which they critically examine their prior knowledge of the issue as well as their potential biases about international development or the people with whom they will work. This pre-trip orientation process is necessary to urge students to begin thinking critically about their positionality in relation to the issue and the community with which they are working.

During the trip, alternative break groups complete projects in partnership with nonprofit organizations in their host communities, which may range from construction to awareness-raising to

assisting in a soup kitchen, for example. Concurrently, students engage in critical reflection—a dialogical process that “stimulates the learner to integrate observations and implications with existing knowledge and to formulate concepts and questions to deepen the learner’s understanding of the world and the root causes of the need for service” (*Jacoby, 1996, p. 10*). The reflection process is central to the critical service-learning pedagogy expected of quality alternative break programs. Critical reflection is contextualized within the service project and site. Through the continuous cycle of experiential learning and the dialogical process of reflection, students are challenged to think and react critically to problems faced by members of the communities with which they are involved. This process is rooted in Dewey’s theory of experiential learning (*Giles & Eyster, 1994*).

Being immersed in diverse environments enables participants to experience, discuss, and understand social issues in a significant way. Through reflection, students make connections between their pre-trip education and their experiences on the trips themselves. Critical reflection enables students to examine how their own identity relates to larger issues of structural inequality, power, privilege, and oppression. The intensity of the immersion experience increases the likelihood that participants will transfer their on-site experience back to their own communities, academic work, and career plans after the alternative break ends. Break Away calls this process reorientation; others might call it post-trip activism or continued engagement. The focus on post-trip engagement has the potential to expand the impact of breaks from the projects and the trips to a lifelong transformation for those involved.

The components of diversity and social justice enrich student experience and contribute to greater impact in communities. Students learn about and work on a social justice issue with a focus on root causes and with attentiveness to the value and necessity of diversity and inclusion in campus programs and community partnerships. Alternative breaks are also drug- and alcohol-free experiences, with a heavy emphasis on facilitated group and individual reflection. While the funding sources, leadership structure, size, and issue foci of alternative breaks are different at each university, the founding elements described above are consistent among nearly all universities with alternative break programs. The national organization Break Away works to train colleges and universities on these principles and offers resources to strengthen alternative break programs across the United States. In 1991, Michael Magevney and Laura Mann, two recent graduates who had been very involved in building a successful alternative break program

at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, gained the support of then-Chancellor Joe B. Wyatt and founded Break Away: The Alternative Break Connection as a national nonprofit organization. Their purpose was to gather the resources and best practices for alternative spring break programs being established on multiple campuses while helping others start similar programs.

Break Away began as a modest resource center for alternative breaks and has grown to be a national organization dedicated to developing lifelong active citizenship through quality alternative break programs. Currently, Break Away works with more than 150 member chapter schools, annually sponsors three large national trainings (the Alternative Breaks Citizenship Schools) and more than 20 regional weekend trainings for more than 125 campuses, and enriches break programs throughout the year with on-site and resource support. The organization also works with peer nonprofits, community partners, and higher education coalitions to promote and further best practices in student leadership, service, community impact, and social justice.

### **Alternative breaks and international service.**

International volunteerism in general has come under fire recently for its potential to do more harm to a community than good. International community partners may host students with low levels of language skill and cultural knowledge, which leads to increased use of the communities' resources and time to support student workers. For example, Birrell (2010) details the negative effects to local communities from volunteer efforts to aid children in South African and Cambodian orphanages. In his description of a Human Sciences Research Council report, Birrell writes,

Wealthy tourists prevent local workers from getting much-needed jobs, especially when they pay to volunteer; hard-pressed institutions waste time looking after them and money upgrading facilities; and abused or abandoned children form emotional attachments to the visitors, who increase their trauma by disappearing back home. (*para. 8*)

In addition to the harm done to the community, there is also the potential for students (or volunteers) to develop paternalistic and ethnocentric attitudes through service relationships. Simpson (2004) critiques the problematic nature of participants' preconceptions about poverty being confirmed rather than questioned through international service programs. Rosenberger (2000) states

that her concern for international service-learning came about because it “easily carries connotations of ‘doing good,’ of the ‘haves’ giving to the ‘have-nots,’ of ‘we’ serving ‘them’—perspectives that reproduce power” (p. 24). Dunant’s party of empathetic idealists looks very similar to such alternative break group participants. This essay intends to highlight the processes and pedagogy that can be put in place to redistribute the power relationships and create a critical awareness of the social issues. Action with only idealism and empathy certainly has the potential to do harm, but putting in place a reciprocal and collaborative structure among stakeholders has the potential to support transformative experiences for both the students and the community.

### **Haiti as a Case Study**

Because of the sudden outpouring of support to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, the authors of this essay felt compelled to seek out a means to respond responsibly. This section will describe the context and the process by which multiple universities formed a unique compact and, by doing so, created best practices of international service work from United States colleges and universities.

#### **The Context in Haiti**

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, brought years of wrestling with the ethical issues of international service work to the forefront for Break Away and university alternative break programs throughout the United States. The outpouring of support for Haiti from people and organizations across the globe was impressive, and U.S. colleges and universities were no exception. Faculty and students organized fundraisers, supply drives, and educational and cultural events in support of the country just 700 miles from the U.S. coast. However, many students wanted to do more, and in the months following the earthquake, students traveled to Haiti to offer “hands-on” aid.

However, the risk to do harm in post-disaster situations, such as in Haiti, is great because of the loss of important resources and the particularly unstable political and environmental situation in-country. While some of this work was worthwhile, and surely most, if not all, was well-intentioned, this help was greeted with criticism from some in the international community. The United States State Department wrote in a January 20, 2011 travel warning:

Despite good intentions—[service workers’] travel to Haiti will increase the burden on a system already struggling to support those in need. Cash donations are the

most effective way to help the relief effort in Haiti, support the country's local economy, and ensure the assistance is both culturally and environmentally appropriate.

### **The Haiti Compact.**

As volunteers and aid poured into Haiti following the earthquake, questions of how to respond ethically and productively became acute for university service programs. In January 2010, Alternative Break staff at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) contacted Break Away's office to discuss how to best handle the influx of LMU students desiring service travel to Haiti. Break Away received similar calls in the following weeks, from other programs and the media, and worked quickly to convene a small group of alternative break staff from schools across the United States: the group now known as the Haiti Compact.

Under the leadership of Break Away, American University (Washington, DC), the College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, Virginia), Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles), Indiana University (Bloomington, Indiana), and the University of Maryland-College Park formed the Haiti Compact in April 2010 to commit to working together long-term with Haitians. At the time of formation, the group agreed to a first step: traveling (with students, where possible) to Haiti in June 2010 for an exploratory trip. If deemed advisable, judicious, realistic, and ethical, the group also agreed to commit to sending alternative breaks to Haiti each year for at least 4 years while developing and promoting best practices in international service.

During the 9-day exploratory trip, Haiti Compact members—a group of 16 student leaders and staff advisors of campus alternative break programs—met with more than 20 community organizations to learn about Haitians' perspectives on post-earthquake Haiti, address safety concerns, and build productive partnerships with Haitian-led organizations. (It should be noted that during the exploratory trip, 6 months after the earthquake, efforts by non-governmental organizations were transitioning from immediate relief work to long-term development and re-development. By the first anniversary of the earthquake, when students from the Haiti Compact arrived in-country, they were engaged solely in development work.)

Since the formation of the Haiti Compact, four of the five schools have sent successful alternative break trips (a total of nine trips to date). The other founding school and new compact



member (University of Connecticut) are still developing potential trips for future years. Break Away has been leading outreach efforts among Break Away chapter schools and others already involved in Haiti to engage more campuses to join the Haiti Compact. As the compact grows and each founding member school's 4-year commitment comes to an end, new compact member schools will remain involved for increased and sustained impact.

### **Rationale for the Haiti Compact Program**

The initial purpose of the Haiti Compact was to answer the following questions: What, if any, is the role of higher education in the relief and rebuilding efforts in Haiti? If there is a role, can potential partners in Haiti be pinpointed to help campuses in the United States engage in sustainable, responsible service work that is both meaningful to students and respectful of the Haitian people?

After the exploratory trip, however, the questions became more complex and broad. In response, the Haiti Compact has gone on to develop a more broad and complex model for international service that guards against the concerns of scattershot, uninformed, and episodic service, while building upon community assets and redistributing power in potentially harmful relationships.

From the outset, the collaborative compact model was central to success in sending productive alternative breaks to Haiti, and in developing and implementing best practices to engage ethically in international service.

### **The Compact Model**

Since the founding of the Haiti Compact in April 2010, the members have mutually developed the compact model. Composed of five key elements, compacts allow groups who would otherwise be working in isolation to connect and increase impact through shared practices.

#### **A. Compelling and timely idea for action.**

Compacts succeed only when focused on issues of acute importance. In the case of the Haiti Compact, the distress and urgency faced by Haitians experiencing the earthquake and its aftermath—and the eager willingness of students to “do something”—coalesced into a compelling and timely call for focused action.

#### **B. Identify and build a defined core.**

It is necessary to have a focused, committed group at the core of a compact, willing to pitch in for a certain length of time, with

detailed roles for members. As convener of the Haiti Compact, Break Away called together a specified number of service professionals (the five staff at founding member schools) for a clearly articulated commitment (exploratory trip, followed by 4 years of alternative break involvement in Haiti). Compact members quickly realized that regular communication would be necessary for progress on their shared goals, and agreed to participate in a weekly conference call. More than 2 years later, those calls have continued, and have proven to be vital in the growth and success of the compact. Further, when individuals (staff members or student leaders) transition out of their positions (as has happened for two of the founding staff members), ongoing communication and well-defined roles allow new staff in those positions to seamlessly join the work of the compact.

### **C. Hold a galvanizing event.**

The Haiti Compact has been a success in large part because of the shared trust and relationships among members. Any compact must have a way for members to develop their working and personal relationships, to provide a foundation of trust and accountability for the tasks ahead—essentially, to ensure that members are “all in.” In the case of the Haiti Compact, the galvanizing event was the exploratory trip. Alternative breakers know that such travel allows for fast intimacy, but this trip also provided space for and clarified the urgent need for high-level conversations and development of best practices.

### **D. Continue developing goals and deepen original commitment.**

Through ongoing communication and the learning that takes place through a galvanizing event, compacts are able to determine further goals and plans for action. In the case of the Haiti Compact, members wrote a report suggesting best practices for schools considering service in Haiti, collaborated on conference presentations and publications, and advanced work in advocacy for Haiti. The stability of the compact model has allowed patience for ongoing goal setting and adjustment as resources and relationships have deepened, additional knowledge and skills have developed, and potential collective action has opened up in ways that could not have been perceived at the start of work together.

### **E. Plan an exit and turnover of leadership.**

Although participating in a compact effectually multiplies available energy compared to performing service work in

relative isolation, it is not always feasible for members to commit indefinitely to such intensive work. Haiti Compact members have committed to 4 years of participation, and are expanding beyond founding schools so that other participants may further the collective work.

## **Benefits of the Compact Model in the Haiti Compact**

By working together as a compact around a critical issue, with each member playing defined roles, sharing the experience of a galvanizing event, staying in regular communication, further developing mutual goals, and knowing when it is time to pass the torch, the Haiti Compact has experienced several benefits. Members are able to build capacity for and with each other and Haitian partners, collaboratively develop crucial resources, hold each other accountable to key principles of social justice, and develop productive community partnerships.

### **Building capacity.**

With the resources of six strong organizations and the people power they represent, the compact was able to build shared capacity. When traveling to Haiti for the exploratory trip, compact members met with a more diverse group of organizations than a single member could have reached alone. Doing so helped members to see the variety of structures, missions, and approaches of nonprofits in Haiti, and to determine which kinds of organizations are best suited for alternative breaks.

Each member school sending trips to Haiti has established relationships with one or two nongovernmental organizations; as the compact expands, multiple campuses will work with each organization. Compact members will build capacity for partners in Haiti by streamlining communication and make a more focused impact through coordinating successive service, so that one group can pick up where a previous group left off.

The compact model has also proven helpful in developing the professional staff members of the Haiti Compact. Weekly conference calls allow members to move forward with compact goals, and allow a forum for members to grapple with broader issues of international service and social justice, holding each other to a high standard. Each member program has grown in depth and sophistication because of the challenging conversations that compact members have held in a context of trust and support.

### **Developing resources.**

The compact has collaborated to develop resources for education, advocacy, safety, and risk management protocols. At the University of Maryland and the College of William and Mary, risk management systems were created for alternative breaks to Haiti, but have been beneficial for all international alternative breaks (and will be a helpful resource for other campuses that develop such breaks).

Compact members worked together to write a 60-page report describing lessons learned on the exploratory trip, recommendations for other alternative break programs, and potential host site summaries. In addition, the report offered tips for assessing capacity to organize an alternative break in Haiti, gaining university approval, and sharing resources for planning the experience. The report-writing process also helped members work through the questions related to ethics and international service presented earlier in this essay. Collecting information on the exploratory trip and distilling it to a single resource to be shared broadly across the United States has allowed other campuses to easily learn from the compact's experience.

### **Principles of social justice.**

The trip also called compact members to take a critical view of international service with United States students, and of the ethical implications involved when students from largely privileged backgrounds travel to lower-income communities and countries to conduct service. The meetings and conversations during the exploratory trip solidified their resolve to collaborate on international service and to encourage others to do so in a responsible, thoughtful, and deliberate way. Even one year after the earthquake, Haiti quickly became subject to isolated, sporadic, and waning enthusiasm from United States student groups. The compact, however, had developed shared enthusiasm for a more ongoing and sustainable partnership model.

Compact members developed shared common values and commitments that hold each member program and individual staff member accountable to principles of social justice. The following values are useful in work with Haiti, but are applicable to all considering the dynamics of power and complexities of international service.

- Education: learning about the historical, political, and economic background of Haiti and United States involvement, to provide context for the current situation

- Social justice: concentrating on a social justice issue and participating in direct service related to that issue with a focus on root causes rather than unsustainable service delivery
- Sustainability and reciprocity: avoiding the displacement of local labor and developing capacity-building projects in concert with host sites while empowering Haitians in their own development
- Advocacy and action: continuing to advance advocacy and action as students return to their home communities

In developing partnerships with organizations in Haiti, compact members have agreed to make realistic commitments on which members can follow through. The compact also developed intentional principles for members of the Haiti Compact, as it is a unique collaborative effort among several universities and a national non-profit. For example, members employ horizontal decision-making to ensure clarity of shared purpose, through weekly conference calls, regular check-ins, and sharing of resources. When one university confronts a challenge, the rest of the compact is eager to step in and help brainstorm ways to overcome the problem. Group problem-solving has proved to be a valuable component in ensuring that not only are the trips safe for students, but that members follow through with compact values in partnership development.

### **Developing tools to create productive partnerships.**

During the exploratory trip, while seeking various partner possibilities, the compact developed an International Host Site Rubric. The rubric codifies and envisions how common values, such as education, social justice versus charity approach, commitment to community voice, safety and security, and community development and sustainability look in action. While in-country, the rubric guided conversations with potential host sites, determining whether basic needs were supported (capacity to accommodate United States volunteers, projects that could be completed by relatively unskilled college students) and whether potential hosts also shared compact values.

Committing to shared values expressed in the rubric sharpened the focus of the compact's work in developing productive partnerships. Haiti, a country that Paul Farmer (2010) has referred to as the "republic of NGOs," has hundreds of nonprofits with

which students could work. The International Host Site Rubric allows alternative break leaders to determine which agencies and organizations best suit each university's ability to contribute in responsible ways and calls programs to closely examine practices in all aspects of alternative breaks. The rubric reflects several values outlined above, particularly avoiding displacement of local labor, partnering with grassroots Haitian organizations, and prioritizing long-term partnerships. These common standards have enabled compact members to develop partnerships that allow for a greater impact in collaboration with Haitian communities. Also, in seeking out university partnerships, the compact agrees that coordinating with the Haitian government, when possible, is vital.

### **The International Host Site Rubric.**

The International Host Site Rubric was critical to progress for the Haiti Compact, but can be used to distinguish between weak and strong community partnerships in alternative break programs, both internationally and domestically.

The rubric highlights multiple categories to consider when building relationships with community organizations. The categories can be divided into two main areas. One area deals with the more philosophical, ethical, value-driven, and educational components, such as community-identified needs, social issues addressed, other existing partnerships, the balance between strong direct service projects and educational components, community development and sustainability, not displacing local labor, post-break student reorientation, and potential for continued engagement with the community and with social issues. The second area deals with more practical and logistical concerns, such as housing, security, transportation, meals, capacity to work with a volunteer team, language barriers, and having a primary contact person willing and able to work with university coordinators and student leaders.

The characteristics in each category occur in a continuum of partnership potential ranging from weakest to strongest (left to right). The rubric suggests that the strongest community partners will incorporate all aspects on the far right of the scale. When determining partnerships, it is important to aim for the far right column, and if aspects fall in the middle section, to realize that the partnership will be more complex and require more support and time invested in developing a working relationship. The rubric advises strongly against sending college-age volunteers to work with any community organization that falls on the far left of the scale.

**Table 1. Rubric for Assessing International Community Partnership Development  
Break Away: The Alternative Break Connection/The Haiti Compact June  
2010**

	<b>Weakest</b>	—————→	<b>Strongest</b>
<b>Housing</b>	Doesn't provide and has no suggestions.	Doesn't provide, but has connections, or does provide, but at a high cost.	Provides on-site. Low or no cost.
<b>Security</b>	Actively downplays need for security, despite other trustworthy warnings.	Will need to find/provide own or site is able to hire.	On-site, included in cost.
<b>On-Site Access</b> • <b>Transportation</b> • <b>Cooks</b> • <b>Translators</b>	No capacity for this.	Has connections or is willing to help make them.	Has or can arrange for a "full package" according to need at an appropriate group cost and fair wage.
<b>Personality of Host Site Connection</b>	Had an extremely difficult time, for whatever reason, communicating in person and online.	A bit guarded in person and erratic communication beforehand. May warm up to be friendly and reliable in communication. Has worked in role for over a year.	Understands the alternative break concept, is excited to host group, and has been helpful, responsive, and even innovative in working with the group. Can articulate goals of organization and projects succinctly. Has been with organization for multiple years.
<b>Capability to work with a 10-12 member volunteer team</b>	Does not have capability or interest.	Hasn't worked with volunteer groups in the past but is willing, or has worked with volunteer groups before, but may lack capacity for 10-12 participants.	Has a volunteer coordinator/direct supervisor, who has demonstrated understanding of the workload that can be carried by a large group and has indicated this through projects developed.
<b>Language</b>	Translator absolutely needed. No e-mail; no phone.	Limited ability to communicate due to language barrier and limited use of technology. Ability to communicate thanks to their and our use of several languages.	Contact is fluent in English and in other languages of the region. Ability to communicate through e-mail and phone. Friends with us on Facebook.
<b>Potential for long-term partnership</b>	Unstable—don't call us, we'll call you, if we're around next year at this time.	Interested—doesn't know feasibility. We would have to work hard on our end to build capacity and long-term relationship.	Pursuing next steps with alternative break group. Has an established rapport with community. Has other well established, clear, and identified partnerships with groups that may look like our own.

**Table 1. Continued: Rubric for Assessing International Community Partnership Development Break Away: The Alternative Break Connection/ The Haiti Compact June 2010**

	<b>Weakest</b>	—————▶	<b>Strongest</b>
<b>Need</b>	High level of bureaucracy. Our group is at the end of the trickle down.	Will work with us, but we're not doing them any favors—or has need and will use alternative break group to both serve immediate needs and capacity build.	High need; grassroots-level work. Volunteer groups are part of capacity building in a sustainable way as well as meeting some pressing and immediate needs for labor and resources.
<b>Issue Specificity</b>	Very broad or scatter-shot. We had to work hard to understand issue(s) of concern.	Many issues; range of less developed and well developed projects or depth. No sense of education around the project.	Clearly defined vision and mission and population served. Conversations with host site generate deeper interest in educational component and possibilities for later advocacy. Projects are related directly to social issue of organization.
<b>Current Partnerships</b>	None.	Unilateral "partnership" or brokers strong partnerships with other organizations.	They are their community. Very symbiotic relationships meshed into the organization. Their work is not just their issue, but community organizing and supporting other organizations.
<b>Education/Direct Service</b>	Weak in both.	Strong in one, no ties or limited ability to help in the other.	30% education, 70% direct service. Direct service based on needs assessment conducted by community.
<b>Community Development Sustainability</b>	We are doing work that could/should be done by locals and have very little interaction with members of the community.	We are working with a few members of the community, but mostly carrying out the ideas of an outside organization as outsiders. We may be having some welcome conversations about creating community-building projects.	Our group of volunteers is not displacing local employment, but is creating funds and supporting efforts at self-sufficiency and dignity. The community sees and understands our role and looks forward to our working side by side with them. We can "pass the torch" of our work to other groups and involve them in a long-term effort.

Application of the International Host Site Rubric will differ for each university's unique alternative break program, depending on what they are looking for in a partnership. The rubric can serve as a guide to create a questionnaire when talking to a new community organization, or to analyze an existing partnership. It can also be



used as a training tool to help students understand the complex nature of university-community partnerships.

### **Best Practices Emerging from the Haiti Compact**

Through the compact model, a number of best practices have proven transferable to other international contexts as they have arisen. This section outlines the products that have come out of the partnership.

#### **Partnerships rubric.**

The International Host Site Rubric has proven to be a critical tool for developing quality alternative break programs in Haiti. The examples provided here can serve as a model for best practices in assessing whether to work with a specific nonprofit organization.

In summer 2011, a student group at the College of William and Mary expressed interest in developing a second alternative break trip to Haiti. The students had a long-term partnership with a specific international nongovernmental organization, having worked with them in a country other than Haiti. This organization's primary focus is connecting students to opportunities for service in developing countries. As plans for the trip progressed, the students began to reconsider the partnership because of concerns that they were displacing local labor and, without local Haitian leadership, were not providing a sustainable service. The students ended their relationship with that organization, based on conversations using the rubric and shared values from their advisor.

American University has had extensive experience working directly with community partner organizations internationally and decided as a university to focus their work in Haiti on women's economic empowerment. Housing and transportation were obtained through a student whose family resided in Haiti during their March 2011 trip. Therefore, those categories on the rubric were not weighted as heavily as seeking an organization that was Haitian-run and focused on women's issues. American University decided to partner with Fonkoze, a microfinance institution whose mission is "building the economic foundations for democracy in Haiti by providing the rural poor with the tools they need to lift themselves out of poverty" (<http://www.fonkoze.org>). After establishing that partnership, they were able to work directly with individuals and personal connections to ensure that all needs were met for the students on the trip.

In contrast, the University of Maryland, after consulting the rubric, decided the best possible option for their unique program needs was to work with an international organization that offered services for visiting groups, in addition to their primary focus of serving their community through issue-based direct services. Because there is an ongoing State Department travel warning in Haiti, the Alternative Breaks program at the University of Maryland had to go through a unique proposal process with the university's risk management committee. It took over a year and half to get the trip approved, and the decision to work with an established host organization, the Mennonite Central Committee, was important for obtaining the approval. Fitting within the far right continuum in all categories on the rubric, the Mennonite Central Committee provided all the material needs to keep the group safe and healthy (e.g., housing, food, local transportation). Further, the host organization took utmost care to ensure that the volunteers' activities would do no harm to the communities. Their requirement that service groups take part in a week of education about Haiti before conducting any projects reflects this concern.

### **Work plans.**

Another best practice for strong community relationships that the Haiti Compact observes is creating work plans in partnership with host organizations, as developed by Northwestern University in its Global Engagement Summer Institute. Students and hosts establish goals and objectives they will achieve together during their alternative break, determine what resources are needed to achieve those goals, and decide on final measures of success. Use of this tool facilitates conversation between students and hosts, and helps hold both sides accountable to the principles of mutuality and capacity-building.

An example of utilizing the work plan to facilitate targeted discussion about project-based service is the College of William and Mary's work with Sonje Ayiti for their January 2012 trip to Haiti. The following highlights reflect the nature of the work plan that student trip leaders developed with Sonje Ayiti contacts.

- The host partner's goal: "Build capacity for [a women's economic cooperative] to operate a profitable business selling value-added food products."
- Activities to achieve that goal: "Meet with members to develop documents and practices of operational activities. Together, write a business plan and marketing plan."

- Required resources: “Internet access while overseas to exchange documents, printed materials for meetings, audiovisual equipment if possible.”
- Outcomes: “One completed business plan and one completed marketing plan.”

For the University of Maryland and its community partner organization, much of the work on-site consisted of education around disaster relief. Thus, many of the goals were not just project- or direct-service-related, but focused on teaching students about the challenges of disaster relief in Haiti in light of the sociopolitical history of the country. Because the organization values education and advocacy for visiting volunteers, the host country staff can provide a comprehensive look at development in Haiti from the perspective of numerous social issues. The work plan helped the trip leaders define what resources they needed in order to help their participants reflect on relevant social issues while in Haiti. When they returned from the trip, the work plan was utilized to track the advocacy activities the group engaged in post-trip. Because post-trip advocacy is so important, this aspect of the work plan helps the trip leaders design educational programming.

As the Haiti Compact develops and grows over the coming years, work plans will be useful in tracking the member schools’ collective impact. The most important aspect to the work plans, however, is already being achieved by establishing a formalized process that allows student leaders to engage in meaningful discussions with community partner agencies to establish trust and work together to achieve community-identified goals.

### **The compact model.**

In addition to tools used by the Haiti Compact in developing strong and productive partnerships (the host site rubric and work plans), the model of a compact itself has emerged as a best practice for international service work. As previously indicated, compacts allow individual alternative break programs to be more effective through the power of committed, well-defined collaboration. Without having worked as a compact to develop shared resources (including risk management procedures), three of the five member schools likely would not have been permitted by university administration to plan trips with their students.

## **Future Research**

Although compact members have seen multiple positive outcomes from working together, more research is needed to determine the Haiti Compact's long-term impact. Two questions are particularly relevant: (1) What is the collective input of students in working with Haitian organizations and advocating on related issues? (2) What is the effect of short-term student involvement, in the context of long-term partnerships, in communities in Haiti?

## **Sustained Enthusiasm After a Disaster**

Seven years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf Coast of the United States, college volunteers continue to work on rebuilding through alternative breaks and other service trips. Students and professionals involved in university-based service work were motivated to quickly and enthusiastically participate in relief, and, subsequently, in development work. In their eagerness, however, they missed the opportunity to garner a sense of the overall long-term involvement of students in rebuilding efforts. The Haiti Compact has the opportunity to capture involvement in Haiti's redevelopment by member schools and other university-based service groups with whom the compact has connected.

## **Understanding the Effects of Student Involvement in Communities**

A second and more complex concern is the need for service-learning professionals to understand the effect of student involvement in communities. How does student volunteerism, learning, and advocacy create positive change in communities, in organizations with whom students partner, and on the broader social issues addressed by alternative breaks? Through Break Away, the Haiti Compact has wrestled with these questions along with other campus service advisors. Break Away now has a relationship with graduate students at New York University's Wagner School of Public Policy who have begun work in exploring and developing tools that alternative break participants can use to consistently capture the collective impact of alternative breaks on communities and social issues in Haiti and across the United States.

Assessing community impact also offers an opportunity to differentiate between collective and isolated efforts in service work. How do the impacts of Haiti Compact schools differ from those of schools carrying out their own, unilateral partnerships with organizations in Haiti? As the Haiti Compact expands and more than one campus works with each community partner, do the effects of

students' service multiply exponentially because of the practice of sequential service (one group picking up where the previous group left off, with coordination assistance by the schools themselves)?

Additionally, noting that Haiti Compact schools prioritize working with Haitian-led and grassroots organizations, there is an opportunity for research on the various impacts possible when working with community-based partners in contrast to larger, international nongovernmental organizations. Is the impact different when the projects students engage in are determined by local leadership and students develop relationships primarily with local community members, rather than internationally-based go-betweens?

## Conclusion

The utter shock of the 2010 disaster in Haiti placed that ever-important question squarely and persistently in front of all the world: "What do we do?" Ruth Messinger of the American Jewish World Service has eloquently identified the propensity to "retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed" (*Haven, 2009*). Alternative break and higher education service practitioners found immediate strength in working together to not retreat, but rather face and work through the challenges and the demanding investment of time and resources. The Haiti Compact organized around the idea that institutions of higher learning are in an ideal position to collaborate in ways that can address the potential pitfalls and damage caused by irresponsible service.

## Compact Collaboration as Best Practice

Individual alternative break programs are effectively applying best practices for service-learning experiences, domestically and internationally. By collaborating in compacts, university programs can intensify their effectiveness on the participating individuals, the host community, and the social issues. Establishing a five-school compact to carry out direct service in Haiti has allowed for creation of practices, relationships, and work plans that are particularly attentive and sensitive to power and privilege, oppression, and exploitation in service work internationally.

Working in a compact format has enabled participants to build meaningful relationships and identify multiple levels of local partnerships, leading to streamlined direct service and education plans in Haiti and advocacy in the United States. Having created risk management resources, work plans, and an evaluative rubric, as well as having acquired personal experience, the compact can now

informatively encourage more campuses in planning the daunting logistical and politically loaded work in Haiti.

In Year 2 of the compact's work in Haiti, communication among compact members continues to be essential. Moving forward, the compact uses weekly discussions to effectively address challenges and ultimately draw in more members with goals of planning sequential direct service with collaborative shared assessment. Notably, the Haiti Compact has been key in creating a high level of accountability in carrying on with this difficult work and in persisting in the principles of social justice—with the intention to call on others within higher learning to do the same.

### **Confronting Challenges**

Again, the challenges of international service work absolutely do not outweigh the need to engage with injustices in the world and to do so responsibly. The Haiti Compact calls upon other institutions of higher education to join this work for an even greater collaboration in assessing collective impact, sharing knowledge and relationships, creating and abiding by responsible and best practices, and building capacity within volunteer programs and in host communities. The compact model can be effectively applied to other service projects and programs. Community need and catalytic educational opportunity continue to meet at the crossroads in many international settings. If we are to utilize the passion, skills, and power of young people and volunteerism, we must engage wisely and together.

### **Acknowledgment**

The Haiti Compact thanks Lisa Hendricks and Courtney Holder (University of Maryland), Jessica Viramontes (Loyola Marymount University), and Gina DeVivo-Brassaw (University of Connecticut) for their help in editing and proofing this material.

### **References**

- Birrell, I. (2010, September 23). Before you pay to volunteer abroad, think of the harm you might do. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/nov/14/orphans-cambodia-aids-holidays-madonna>
- Bowen, G. (2011, Spring). Fostering college students' civic commitment through alternative breaks. *Journal for Civic Commitment*. Retrieved from <http://www.mesacc.edu/other/engagement/Journal/Issue16/Bowen.shtml>
- Break Away. (n.d.). *Alternative breaks*. Retrieved from <http://www.alternativebreaks2012.org/>

- Break Away. (2012). *2012 Chapter School Survey results*. Retrieved from <http://www.alternativebreaks2012.org/highlights?q=19>
- Doerr, E. (2011). Cognitive dissonance in international service-learning: Possibilities and challenges for service-learning pedagogy. In B. J. Porfilio & H. Hickman (Eds.), *Critical service-learning as a revolutionary pedagogy: A project of student agency in action* (pp. 71–93). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Farmer, P. (2010, December). *5 lessons from Haiti's disaster*. Retrieved from <http://www.haitispecialenvoy.org/press-and-media/in-the-news/5-lessons-from-haitis-disaster/>
- Giles, D. E., & Eyster, J. S. (1994). The theoretical roots of service-learning in John Dewey: Toward a theory of service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 1(1), 77–85.
- Haven, C. (2009, June). *Ruth Messinger exhorts students to be strong, bold, courageous*. Retrieved from <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/june17/bacca-061709.html>
- Holland, B. A. (2001, Summer). A comprehensive model for assessing service-learning and community-university partnerships. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 114, 51–60.
- Jacoby, B. (Ed.). (1996). *Service-learning in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jones, S. R., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Ireland, S. M., Niehaus, E., & Cilente Skendall, K. (2012, March/April). The meaning students make as participants in short-term immersion programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(2), 201–220.
- McHugh, B. (2004). *Formative years: Lessons from a decade in the service learning field*. Retrieved from <http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/166/Formative%20YearsRev.pdf>
- Mitchell, T. D. (2008, Spring). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 50–65.
- Polman, L. (2010). *The crisis caravan*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.
- Rosenberger, C. (2000). Beyond empathy: Developing critical consciousness through service learning. In C. R. O'Grady (Ed.), *Integrating service learning and multicultural education in colleges and universities* (pp. 23–43). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Simpson, K. (2004). "Doing development": The gap year, volunteer-tourists and a popular practice of development. *Journal of International Development*, 16, 681–692. doi:10.1002/jid.1120
- United States Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs. (2011, January 20). *Travel warning: Haiti*. Retrieved from [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/tw/tw\\_5239.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5239.html)
- United States Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs. (2011, August 8). *Travel warning: Haiti*. Retrieved from [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/tw/tw\\_5541.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5541.html)

## About the Authors

**Jill Piacitelli** is the executive director of Break Away: The Alternative Break Connection. Her research interests include community impact, social movements, student development, and gender issues. Piacitelli earned her bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University.

**Molly Barwick** is the co-director of the Institute for Social Impact at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business. Her research interests include social entrepreneurship, food access, and the role of food in cultural definition. Barwick earned her bachelor's degree from University of Vermont and her master's degree from the University of Cincinnati.

**Elizabeth Doerr** (formerly of University of Maryland) is the associate director of SOURCE (Student Outreach Resource Center), the community service and service-learning center for the Johns Hopkins University Schools of Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health. Her research interests include asset-based community development, critical pedagogy, and social justice education. Doerr earned her bachelor's degree from Willamette University and her master's degree from the University of Maryland.

**Melody Porter** is the associate director of Community Engagement at the College of William & Mary. Her research interests include social justice education, community impact and sustainable food systems. Porter earned her bachelor's degree and Master of Divinity from Emory University.

**Shoshanna Sumka** is the assistant director of Global Learning and Leadership at the Center for Community Engagement & Service at American University. Her research interests include international education, global service-learning, environmental justice, and gender issues. Sumka earned her bachelor's degree from Earlham College and M.A.A from the University of Maryland.