Preparing to Serve: Sensemaking, Sensegiving, and Diversity Learning in an Alternative Break Program and Connected Honors Course

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Abstract: Atypical in Alternative Break (AB) practice, an intentionally connected course was examined to understand students' perceptions of their semester-long experience. Using qualitative narrative analysis, authors analyze data from 20 AB participants to evaluate student perceptions and experiential outcomes before, during, and after their service trips (one involving the social issue of human environment impact and the other, hunger and homelessness). Pre- and post-trip instruction on the causes and issues related to privilege, oppression, dominant narratives, and potential pitfalls related to immersive service is presented. Reflective blogs are measured against two theoretical frameworks: diversity learning and sensemaking. Results indicate powerful sensemaking when service and learning combine in a synergistic relationship, with students articulating the importance of class learning coupled with informal interactional learning and hands-on experience for gaining knowledge of an issue and understanding for those involved. Authors suggest that AB practitioners/faculty be diligent in preparing students to serve; thoughtful in selecting strong on-trip service experiences and community partners; mindful of the importance of reflection; and dedicated to furthering post-trip learning through sensegiving.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; place-based education; citizenship education; Break Away (organization); service-learning; Wichita State University (KS)—Dorothy and Bill Cohen Honors College

Service-learning has been a longtime curricular teaching method on college campuses and is widely used to help public universities meet their mission of connecting with the community and developing students with a civic ethos. One form of service-learning increasingly practiced is known broadly as an Alternative Break (AB), which connects education to significant community service in either a domestic or international setting other than the home community of the sponsoring institution (Sumka, Porter, Williams, & Piacitelli, 2015). ABs gained their name as an "alternative" to the traditional spring break beach or party-like atmosphere trips of choice among many college students. Instead, these trips focus on service and the community.

Alternative Break trips incorporate common components of reflection, community service or experiential learning, and pre-trip meetings or courses (Johnson, Z., 2013; Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2012; Niehaus, 2012). ABs involve immersing students in environments that require interaction with a diverse and unfamiliar group of people or exposing students to new environments (Buschlen & Warner, 2014; Jones & Abes, 2004; Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2012). By participating in these diverse programs, students ideally begin to challenge their personal values and develop a deeper consciousness of self (Buschlen & Warner, 2014; Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2012; Rhoads & Neururer, 1998). Many positive outcomes are correlated with interactions of diverse peers, such as increased cognitive skills and leadership development (Bowen, 2011; Parker & Pascarella, 2013).

ABs also have a goal of assisting a community in building capacity through working with nonprofit organizations. Capacity building is a form of community service with the aim of assisting the community in accomplishing their goals by equipping them with the needed resources or skills to achieve the mission of their work (Sumka et al., 2015). Capacity building cannot be fully achieved, however, if students do not have an understanding of the community and their own privilege and how they connect with that community (Sumka et al., 2015). Privilege is defined as receiving unearned benefits through belonging to a dominant group related to race, ethnicity, educational status, socioeconomic status, gender expression or identity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and/or ability (Sumka et al., 2015). Previous research has established that students participating in AB experiences hold a higher level of privilege than many of the communities they serve (Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2012) across a variety of different categories including educational attainment (Buschlen, 2016; Heldman, 2011; Niehaus, 2016; Sumka et al., 2015).

Another challenge is that diverse interactions do not happen automatically, and the simple creation of a diverse student body does not ensure that interactions will occur (Gurin et al., 2002). When diverse interactions do occur, a positive experience is not a guaranteed outcome. More troubling, negative experiences with diversity without proper structure and support may lead to negative outcomes such as development of a savior complex and the use of othering language and actions (Buschlen, 2016; Green, 2001; Seider & Hillman, 2011). A savior complex, hero complex, or "do-gooder" attitude involves a self-concept that we are here to "save the day" and have the potential to leave students with a feel-good orientation but without the understanding of the inequities involved in the community work (Sumka et al., 2015). Students without some degree of diversity understanding are inadequately equipped to contribute to their communities both domestically and internationally (Johnson & Martin, 2017). Negative diversity experiences in service-learning research have noted the potential for being "mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938); this results in victim blaming, reinforcing stereotypes, and using "othering" language (Niehaus, 2016), which in turn can create an "us and them" scenario in which us (students) is superior or correct (Johnson, Z., 2013; Niehaus, 2016, 2017; Porter, 2011).

Often, critics of Alternative Breaks cite students developing these negative outcomes through participation in "voluntourism," an increasingly popular form of travel that focuses on transactional experiences that leave privileged participants feeling positive about their experience but often result in no real change on a deeper level for the travelers (Sumka et al., 2015). Voluntourism can result in students traveling to a community they do not understand to volunteer in ways that are not necessarily helpful or sustainable for the community. Students develop a savior complex when they think that they have solved an issue or a situation or that the community should be grateful for their selfless efforts. According to Sumka, Porter, Williams, and Piacitelli (2015, p. 306), "the risk, then is of Alternative Breaks falling into the voluntourism trap in which program design lacks an educational lens, volunteers lack cultural sensitivity and language . . . and the hard situations of community members are exploited for pity and profit."

One strategy for addressing these potential downsides of Alternative Breaks is to require students take a for-credit academic course connected with the experience (Sumka et al., 2015; Wendel, 2013). The course focuses on social issues and intentionally designed curriculum to supplement the learning that occurs through the immersive service experience. While a connected

course is atypical for Alternative Breaks, service-learning courses have been in practice for years to enhance specific outcomes in a community-based setting. Benefits of service-learning courses include increased capacities for civic engagement, effective communication, collaborative working relationships, engaging with diverse peers, and the ability to learn and think globally (Bringle et al., 2011; Kuh, 2008).

Honors education has a long history of being a space for innovative teaching methodology, experience-based learning, immersive travel courses, and courses with service-learning components (Benowitz, 2021; Braid & Long, 2010; Braid & Quay 2021; Ford & Zubizarreta, 2018; Walshe, 2020). The program in this study leveraged a partnership between a student affairs program (AB) and a connected course housed in the campus honors college. The honors college culture welcomed a willingness to experiment with learning environments.

As part of a larger research project, the purpose of this study is to discuss the impact of a connected honors course on students' Alternative Break experience. The overarching research question provides a framework to understand retrospective thoughts on course components and a student's overall AB experience. Therefore, the question—"How do students make sense of their semester-long Alternative Break and connected honors course experience?"—guided our inquiry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two complementary theoretical frameworks presented the research question. The diversity learning framework (Gurin et al., 2002) allowed us to look at the entirety of the semester experience. The second involved the concepts of *sensegiving* and *sensemaking* that allow for understanding potential student learning that comes about as a result of participation (Weick, 1995). Both frameworks are explained below, and an illustration is provided in Figure 1 on how the frameworks complement one another through the data analysis process.

Diversity Learning Framework

Gurin et al. (2002) provided a framework for how diversity could be linked to educational outcomes in higher education, which for this study was the AB experience and connected honors course. The framework highlighted three types of diversity learning structures—structural diversity, information

interactional diversity, and classroom diversity—all of which contributed to a student's educational experiences. Structural diversity refers to students of different races and ethnicities attending the same university or the numerical representation of diverse groups, thus constructing a diverse student body; it increases the probability that diversity interactions might occur but does not guarantee that intergroup interactions will occur or that the interactions will result in positive diversity learning. Thus, Gurin et al. (2022) used the term "informal interactional diversity," which considers the frequency and quality of intergroup interactions. These interactions most often happen outside of the formal classroom in social or extracurricular activities such as clubs and organizations, service work, residence halls, or campus events. The third form of diversity learning, classroom diversity, refers to intentional learning about diverse people through content knowledge and gaining experience alongside diverse peers in the classroom.

Sensemaking Theory

The concept of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is useful for exploring how individuals make meaning, take action, and create shared mindfulness with their different team members and communities of immersion. Sensemaking is an ongoing social process that involves individuals deriving meaning from their own experiences and environments in a shared setting (Maitlis, 2005). Weick (1995) provided a framework for explaining the sensemaking process, divided into seven properties: identity construction, retrospection, enactment, social and ongoing process, extraction of cues, and plausibility.

Identity construction refers to who a student thinks they are in relation to their team or the community of immersion. **Retrospection** is a form of reflection in the context of service-learning that allows for meaning-making through disturbances in a student's context, be that a class assignment or service experience; it offers a lens to examine students' perceptions related to understanding personal privilege. **Enactment** allows for the creation of narratives that provide a sense of the individual's understanding of shared experiences. The fourth and fifth properties involve sensemaking as a **social** and **ongoing process** that requires students to be a part of a shared experience or, in the context of this study, an Alternative Break and connected course. **Extraction of cues** involves the shared environment of interactions of all individuals (instructors, non-profit leaders, community members, peers) that a student encounters throughout the semester experience, thus allowing for the seventh and final property, which is **plausibility**. Through interactions

in the shared environment, individuals decide what actions and explanations are believable. Plausibility over accuracy holds preference for an individual or the collective in sensemaking.

Sensegiving refers to the directives, cues, and expectations that a leader gives others in an organizational setting (Maitlis, 2005). The framework demonstrates that elevated levels of sensegiving correspond to elevated levels of sensemaking. However, those in leadership roles can point to what cues and information an individual should pay attention to. This lens helped with understanding the role of design and instruction in the overall AB experience. For a visual representation for how these two frameworks were used to analyze the data, refer to Figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the framework.

A sensemaking and sensegiving organizational framework provided a lens to explore how our student participants made sense of or understood the intention or emphasis given by staff advisors, faculty learning partners, instructors, or trip leaders via their selection and design of the pre-trip educational activities, reflection methods, and diversity requirements for the Alternative Break trip (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995).

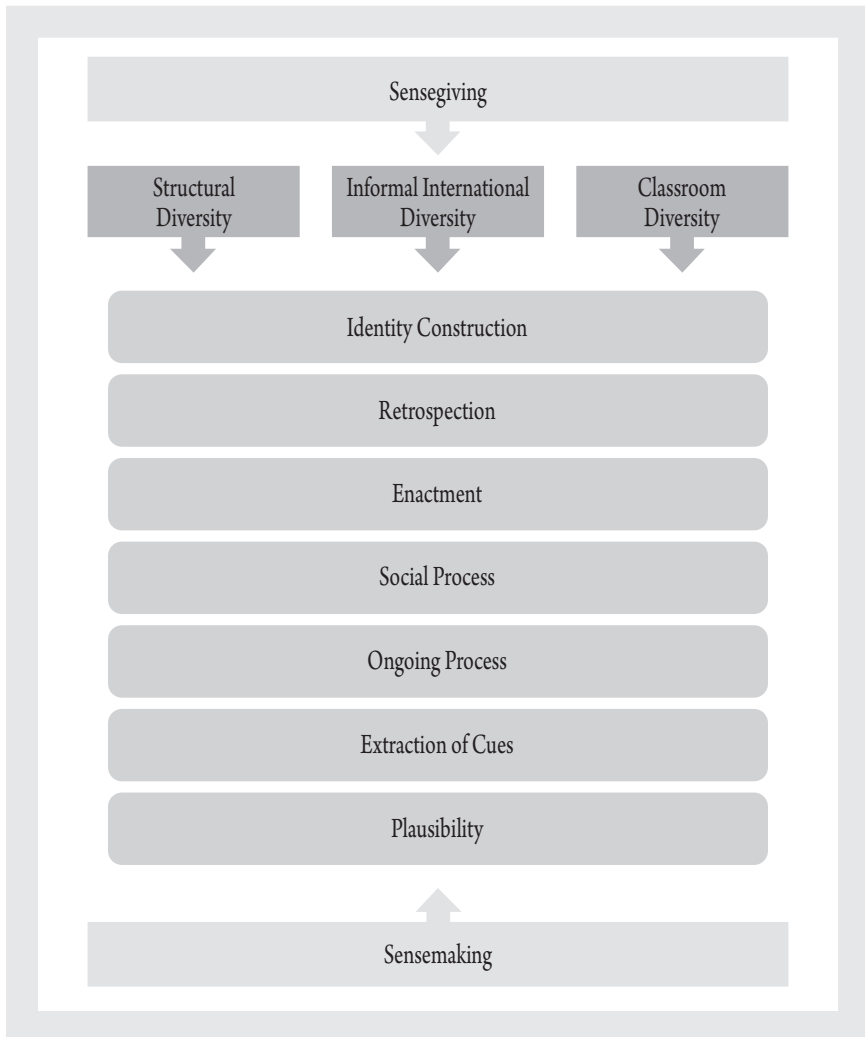## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Our study used an interpretive qualitative research design, and we created digital methods with the goal of understanding the students' experience and learning related to the phenomena (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017; Hine, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The study was conducted at a Midwestern, four-year, public university. The connected honors course was designed and instructed in partnership with a student affairs Alternative Break program and a connected honors seminar course. The institution is a member of Break Away, the largest national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and supporting Alternative Break programs. The university adopts the philosophies of Break Away to provide a framework for its break programs and to provide a framework for the connected course (see Break Away, 2017). (Break Away resources can be found at <https://alternativebreaks.org> or <https://www.break-away.org>.) Twenty students were enrolled in an honors seminar titled "Alternative Breaks: Service and Leadership," which was created through the university's honors college as an Issues and Perspective course meeting general education requirements. One group traveled to Santa Catalina Island, California, and worked with the Catalina Conservancy. The second group traveled to Washington, D.C., and

worked with various community organizations through a partnership with Youth Services Opportunities Project.

Regardless of the AB trip, all students were enrolled in the same course and participated in many activities collectively. Students completed reading assignments, watched documentaries, and participated in simulations specific to their trip's focus. After the trip, students shared their experiences with one another through a trip-specific reorientation night in which students from each location shared with the other group about their on-trip experiences.

FIGURE 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK APPLICATION

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                        Sensegiving
                            │
                            ▼
   Structural        Informal International       Classroom
   Diversity              Diversity               Diversity
       │                      │                      │
       ▼                      ▼                      ▼

                   Identity Construction

                      Retrospection

                        Enactment

                     Social Process

                     Ongoing Process

                    Extraction of Cues

                       Plausibility

                            ▲
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                       Sensemaking
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Note: From Redger-Marquardt, 2019

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 years old and represented all four years of undergraduate class rank as well as two graduate students. Of the 20 students, 5 were male and 15 were female, 3 were international students, and 2 were nontraditional students. Students also represented a diverse demographic related to sexual orientation, race, and religion, including 2 students who disclosed identifying on the LGBTQ spectrum, 13 who were Caucasian, 2 Muslim, 1 Jewish, 3 Latina, 1 African American, 2 Middle Eastern, and 4 Asian American. Many students identified as Christian in their personal blogs.

Our study used a constant comparative method of analysis, which involves continually considering the data in relation to itself with the goal of understanding emergent categories and then themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All data, inclusive of blogs and documents, were collected, mined, and analyzed with the goal of discussing the richest, in-depth data throughout the process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2015). Although the experiences of the students took place in a physical setting, they were required to write reflections on their experience in a public weblog format, which were the primary source of data collected and analyzed using accepted virtual research methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017; Hine, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The personal blogs of the 20 students who took the course were included for analysis, including nine from Catalina Island and eleven from Washington, D.C. Each student completed a total of 12–15 blogs, depending on their choice of submitting extra-credit blogs. The blogs contained text, graphic, and/or pictorial data, and although data analysis happened primarily of text, pictorial data was also explored and coded when used by the participant to highlight their learning or understanding.

Document review allowed for another information-rich source of data to provide additional details related to the connected course and service sites used for the AB portion of the experience.

To ensure research quality, the methods used for this study followed established qualitative practices appropriate for a virtual method interpretive qualitative study. The methods selected to collect, analyze, interpret, and present that data are clearly outlined to ensure that an appropriate methodology was used (Creswell, 2015; Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was approved via the university IRB process.

During the time of this study, the first author served as an instructor and program leader for the Alternative Break program at the university. In this role as the primary sensegiver, she created the course curriculum employing the Break Away components as an accepted practice for program design. The first

author also selected the trip locations and the social justice focus of the trip. Finally, both authors have a strong belief in the power of communities and universities coming together for a common purpose.

FINDINGS

Findings for both trips specific to the connected course are presented below. This article specifically focuses on the connection between the course and the Alternative Break immersive service-learning experience. The on-trip findings as part of the larger research study will be presented in future publications.

One of the goals of the intentionally designed connected course is to help students better assist the community in building capacity by teaching them about privilege, diversity, and systemic social justice issues prior to the immersive service-learning experience. Peer-to-peer interactions (structural diversity learning), readings, class activities, simulations, class discussions (classroom diversity learning), and on-trip experiences (informal interactional diversity learning) are represented through students' reflective posts. To that end, students explored articles related to service and travel-based service, including topics of voluntourism, savior complex development, and what it means to serve others or promote a cause.

The sensegiving also differed in relation to each trip's cause focus. For the Catalina Island trip, students explored conservation, access to national and public parks, environmental stewardship, island-specific issues experienced in Catalina, and concepts of recycling, reduction of waste, and related policies and practices. They learned about the history of Catalina and how greatly the film industry has impacted the ecosystem of the island. For the Washington, D.C., trip, students focused on understanding systemic issues related to poverty, food insecurity, and causes of homelessness, examining dominant and unfamiliar narratives related to those experiencing homelessness or hunger. They delved into food deserts, gentrification, access to education and to free and reduced lunches, and basic city policy for Washington, D.C., related to housing practices. In both groups of students, sensegiving informed sensemaking through course mission and purpose, understanding and examination of the dominant narratives, and privilege in concept and as personal identity.

Sensegiving Informs Sensemaking through Course Mission and Purpose

This theme emerged from both experiences, but for this article the data will be presented only from the Catalina Island trip. Students, throughout blog posts, spoke about how much the course, through its mission and purpose, informed their entire experience. This development of an understanding of the course influenced the sensemaking of the students and is an example of how sensegiving, through the course instructor's explaining the goals of the course, impacted the students' learning. The chief sensegiver, or the course instructors (in this case the first author and a graduate teaching assistant) selected the content to be included in the course with the goal of enhancing learning related to the trip's focus. Early in the course, students recognized the need to prepare for a trip in which most of them had little to no prior knowledge related to the service focus, but those applying for the program were often service-minded students. One student wrote, "Before this trip even starts, we talk about what it means to go on a service trip and how it's not going to save the world but, it will teach us something." The excitement and sense of hope about what they would encounter was evident as the same student continued, "I'm excited what else I will learn on the island about conservation and service."

Student blog postings during the time immediately before the trip increased in the feelings of sensemaking related to understanding the topics related to the trip, feeling they were ready, and sharing their good intentions for the time spent in service. The Catalina Island trip students constructed their identities as volunteers interested in the environment by extracting cues related to conservation from the instructors and course content to prepare themselves for the immersive portion of the course. For example, one male student wrote, "While the subject matter of the trip is quite apparent, the environment that we'll be entering is relatively new to some of us. . . . I'm looking to push through and put forth my very best effort to learn through this experience." While the course mission and purpose of the trip were instilled in the students prior to travel, the preparation could be witnessed through the on-trip reflections students shared about how the course was "brought to life" during their time on Catalina Island.

Newly constructed identities related to a better understanding of self in relation to environment and personal privilege were often attributed to the connected service-learning course. "Besides the overall lesson of the trip, I may have learned more about myself through this trip," one student shared.

Students articulated a better understanding of self, feelings of growing and becoming a better person, a deeper understanding of human impact on the environment, and the importance of their peers and the course to their overall sensemaking.

Students spoke about their intended enactment of future behaviors or changes in behavior based on their experience in Catalina. "I believe that we all took something from our time in Catalina, and we are currently applying it to our community here," wrote one student upon his return from California. This feeling of bringing back lessons and practices to the students' home college community was a common theme throughout both on-trip and post-trip blog posts.

Students time and again intertwined the importance of their learning to structural elements (peers), informal interaction learning (experience), and classroom learning (coursework and activities). Classroom diversity learning, combined with the informal interactional and structural diversity learning of the trip, provided an educational environment that informed their overall understanding of the mission and purpose of the trip.

Understanding and Examining Dominant or Unknown Narratives

Another part of the course asks students to examine the narratives that relate to the trip's focus. Articles were selected for homework reading, and in-class group pre-reflection discussions were held, with further group reflection activities occurring during the trip and in the students' individual blogs. Data from the Catalina Island Alternative Break experience illustrate this theme.

Students began their topical learning related to environment, human impact, and conservation during the first weeks of the semester as outlined on the course syllabus. During times of classroom diversity learning related to environmental stewardship and access, students began to redefine what might be plausible in their personal relationship with the environment, sharing that they had "never thought of" or "had not considered to this level" many of the topics that the articles for class were exploring. Prior to the trip most students consistently shared that they had not been exposed to the issues, the location, or broad concepts of the trip's focus.

During the trip, this examination of the narratives surrounding environment continued. While on Catalina Island, students worked with the Catalina Island Conservancy and stayed at the Laura Stein Volunteer Camp. The issues discussed in the student blogs became more specific to Catalina

Island as the students continued to share the theme of their unawareness and how much "they did not know" prior to the class and trip related to human impact on environment. Examples of new narratives included "overwhelming plant growth either from native or nonnative reasons," "trail maintenance" or "social trails," the impact of "bison brought over for the movie making industry," and "conservation or naturalist training" to understand a local environment. Through their pre-trip readings and their onsite training from the Conservancy, students learned the history of the island that has had a major impact on its current state.

Another emerging theme was the thought of an expanded understanding that would lead to community-driven change. Students observed that the populace of Catalina were more aware of how to recycle, taking note of what "special trash cans" to use and how everyone "recycles and practices basic conservation" because "in Catalina it's definitely about community efforts." The Conservancy volunteers explained to the students that recycling and using proper animal-safe trash cans is a part of learning to live on the enclosed system of an island.

Students began to connect their Catalina Island education and actions with thoughts about future generations and their own personal community. For example, one student wrote that "how people in Catalina Island do the changes they made for the good and the bad things that happened there are a good example of what we can look for in our community." Others began to highlight issues with replication in their home community: "The things in [my college city] definitely work in different ways. When we recycle, we need to pay for it. I think that will cause people to be less likely to participate." Regardless of location, students consistently shared their thoughts on how human actions now will affect the future.

Privilege: Concept and Personal Identity

Another component of the course mission and purpose was to expose students to the concept of privilege in its many forms. Students read articles related to voluntourism, saving the world, the necessity of service, and environment, hunger, and homelessness. This foundation served as intentional sensegiving to provide cues for students through the exploration of service and privilege. Data from the Washington, D.C., experience is presented to illustrate this theme.

For most students the concept of privilege or personal privilege was new to them. One student wrote, "Privilege to me is an interesting idea, it wasn't

until I came to college [and this class] that I was introduced to the subject of privileges." Sharing feelings of negativity and stigma associated with privilege, another student stated, "Privilege seems to be a hot word. People feel attacked when it's used towards them, and those more privileged than others try to find any little thing that makes them less privileged in the Oppression Olympics." She questioned, "Personally, I find this is single-handedly the stupidest thing a person could do. If you have privilege, why would you not use it to help?" Some of the most common connections were related to access to education; one student acknowledged simply, "I am able to go to college." The other common connection was the socioeconomic privilege of being able to participate in an Alternative Break. For example, a student wrote, "I am blessed with many socioeconomic privileges to be able to have the opportunity to attend this trip." Along with the understanding of these privileges came students' ability to understand times in which they did not possess privilege. Students consistently made the connection between first learning about and understanding their privilege and then keeping that awareness as they prepared for the immersive trip: "I couldn't be more grateful for the preparation we had. . . . I believe that this class equipped us to be ready for most things that came our way. Especially when it came to learning about personal privilege." On the trip, many students made connections back to their classroom diversity learning related to privilege and the dominant narratives surrounding food and shelter.

Privilege and Food and Shelter Insecurity

Many students described a deeper or different understanding related to the issues of hunger, homelessness, and poverty because of the overall AB experience. One student wrote in a pre-trip blog, "Regardless, privilege plays a huge part in service. Without understanding the situation of those we serve, with our own personal histories in mind, we are unable to truly serve." By developing this personal understanding students were able to put their learning and the service experience in context. One student shared a retrospective view of his experience and connection to course context, writing, "I often thought of my own privilege. I thought about how I can use my privilege to help. I thought about many things, all contributing to the growth in my capacity to help." He continued, "This week was definitely not about being a white savior, nor self-discovery, not even exploring D.C. (though the latter two definitely came in anyways). No, this trip was about people." Later in the same blog the student shared, "I realized that I took warm showers and a warm

place to sleep for granted. The place at which we stayed got extremely cold at night, and the showers did not have warm water."

Each of these statements reveals the perceptions students have regarding sensemaking related to the privilege and the connection to service in a broader sense and some of the issues that those experiencing homelessness or food insecurity might be facing. Financial stability, access to showers and warm beds, and the connection to health were common moments in which students recognized their privilege during informal interactional diversity learning moments.

Making Sense of Voluntourism and Savior Complexes

The course specifically addressed issues such as the savior complex, othering language, and voluntourism often associated with travel-based service. The course is designed to ask students to take a critical look at the trip focus area, explore what is often not talked about in service, and prepare students for entering a community other than their own.

Discussing savior complexes in her pre-trip blog a student wrote, "Everyone falls into thinking this way sometimes, especially when you come from a place of privilege that allows you to do so." She continued, "It takes a great deal of humility to step back and recognize the privileges you have and what others do not." During a day of service in a D.C. metro pantry, the student connected her personal privilege in relation to the guests she met during her work that day: "I identify as Arab, but I realize I am white passing and many, many things in life will be much easier for me because of this." This same student shared her on-trip understanding of a savior complex and service writing: "If today taught me anything, it taught me how to offer my service to those in need. Not in a white savior, pitiful, 'oh, no they need help' kind of offering of service, but an actual, genuine willingness to help alongside other human beings who just wanted to help." In our analysis of student blogs, instances of savior complexes were not frequently coded.

Students also saw themselves as a mixture of "tourist" during their free time with service as the "main purpose" of their trip, which they noted as a positive balance for trip participants. Students discussed the contrast of these experiences throughout the week, with one student writing, "This trip was an eye-opening experience to see the huge discrepancies within the top one percent and the homeless." Students connected to their classroom learning prior to the trip, understanding that they could not "solve the problem" but learning through the trip to "develop a greater passion to help with these issues."

Echoing this sentiment, another student wrote, "I learned to understand that short-term intensive service-learning projects are not going to bring about radical change." While students compartmentalized their time into service and free time, the reflection of these experiences blended into being an alternative breaker who got to see the city of Washington, D.C., through varied perspectives during their week-long stay.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Alternative Break trips are often touted as life-changing service experiences and have increased in popularity both in the numbers of universities offering them and in the number of students participating. The program in this study was unique in that a required connected service-learning honors course complemented the immersive service-learning trip.

Both theoretical frameworks used in this study served as an important part of the data analysis process. Sensemaking and sensegiving through diversity learning provided a helpful frame to organize the findings and draw conclusions. While the trips had similarities and differences, blogs from each trip were dynamic and robust in students' portrayal of their experiences. To explain the conclusions and implications drawn from this study, we use a series of funnels to provide a visual representation.

Pre-Trip Identify Construction

The first funnel in the series (Figure 2) illustrates the type of students who were drawn to the program to begin with and how they viewed themselves or constructed their identity prior to embarking on the Alternative Break journey. In the early stages of the student blogs, students were excited and hopeful for their experience, believed in the value of service, and hoped their work would make a positive impact. After the first weeks of the semester, the students developed a deeper understanding of the trip topic and learned about the trip's mission and purpose through an equal emphasis on service and learning through the connected course.

Sensemaking: Placing Equal Emphasis on Service and Learning

Without the course, students reflected that their experience would not have been as robust and their understanding not as complete. The emphasis on learning was demonstrated by *offering* and *requiring* the connected honors

course, which served as a significant cue to students in how they constructed their understanding of being both a student and a volunteer.

With equal emphasis on both service and learning, students reflected on their understanding of the importance of preparing for service. This process of learning occurred through social issue education, a form of classroom diversity learning in areas such as the impact poverty has on food security or how social trails contribute to minimizing human impact on environment. As an informal interactional diversity during the trip, students witnessed and participated firsthand in a soup kitchen that welcomed all who were in need. After the trip, students participated in reorientation activities with the goal of sharing their experiences with others in an advocacy role. While structural diversity learning was present, this form of learning was not heavily discussed in student blogs. Instead, the combination of classroom and informal interactional learning was perceived to be the most transformational.

Preparing to Serve: The Importance of Pre-Trip Education in Social and Ongoing Sensemaking

Time and again, students wrote about the class contributing to their learning or understanding during their AB experience. The pre-trip education allowed students to enact an environment that was social and ongoing.

FIGURE 2. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF PRE-TRIP PARTICIPANT
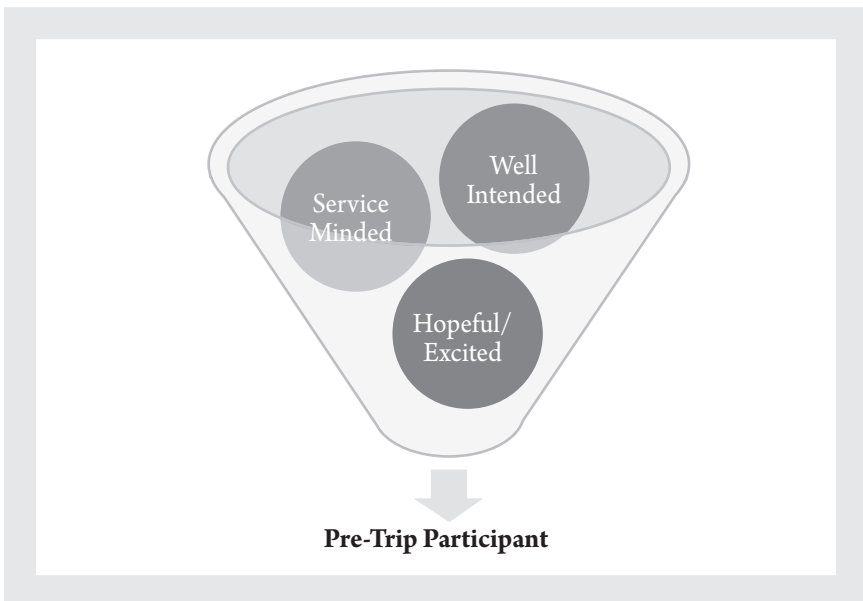
That is, they collectively and individually redefined what they understood related to the trip topics and their personal identity within both the AB context and that of the broader world. A combined curriculum for both trips related to understanding the potential negative side of service (savior complex, unintended harm, and privilege) and the importance of understanding how to serve; team building and trip logistical conversations in general were discussed in student blogs and noted in course documents. Both the shared and trip curriculum served as strong cues that students showed students how to link ideas to larger concepts.

Curriculum Selection: The Importance of Plausibility

The selection of the curriculum was a form of sensegiving for trip participants. Through the semester-long process students reconsidered what was plausible related to their AB trip. Weick (1995) posed that people favor plausibility over accuracy when constructing their understanding of a situation or environment. Students extracted cues based on what they were reading, discussing, and writing. This sensemaking process was often described as an eye-opening experience that reframed their plausibility related to the trip focus. Many students described feelings of learning and unlearning what they thought they understood about a topic (e.g., causes of homelessness) or narratives that were unfamiliar to them (e.g., impact of invasive species on a habitat). Curriculum design carries a level of responsibility in civic work, and the educator in charge of curriculum design has the responsibility to select articles and activities that educate, empower, and inform student trip participants.

Sensemaking: Attending to Privilege, Voluntourism, Savior Complex

Prior to the trip, students shared that the concept of privilege (both personal privilege and how privilege relates to service and systems of oppression and power) was unfamiliar to them. They had not heard of terms such as voluntourism, savior complex, and othering. Through the sensemaking process, students built or expanded their personal constructions of identity. By addressing these concepts, students conversed, reflected, and made sense prior to immersive service so that they felt better prepared to serve, especially for the Washington, D.C., trip.

For both trips, participants spoke about privilege in their blog posts throughout the semester, but the hunger and homelessness trip evoked more

instances of privilege and oppression as examples in their daily service work. Students constantly referred to their classroom diversity learning related to these topics. They spoke of where they possessed privilege in certain situations and where systems were inequitable. By including these topics as part of the pre-trip curriculum, students were more aware, had some level of training, handled emotions in healthy manners, and had the language to discuss their experiences within a Diversity and Social Justice frame of reference. It is important to discuss potential pitfalls and difficult conversations such as privilege, oppression, power, othering, savior complexes, voluntourism and practicing cultural humility.

Intellectually and abstractly, students understood they were not going to change the world during their short time in either location, but their desire to make a difference and have a positive impact was evident. In moments when negative habits or thoughts (i.e., othering language or feelings of saving the day) might have occurred, students explained their ability to stop themselves, recognize their purpose, and rely on their pre-trip learning.

Cause-Specific Sensegiving: Classroom Diversity Learning

The second major component of the curriculum focused on the cause issues for each trip. The course began to differ for students, depending on the location they visited. Dominant narratives needed to be unpacked, and some learning and unlearning occurred. Students described their personal upbringing, noting they had never recycled or thought about the environment in their daily life. In addition, students talked about never seeing hunger or homelessness in their hometown or possibly more affluent school.
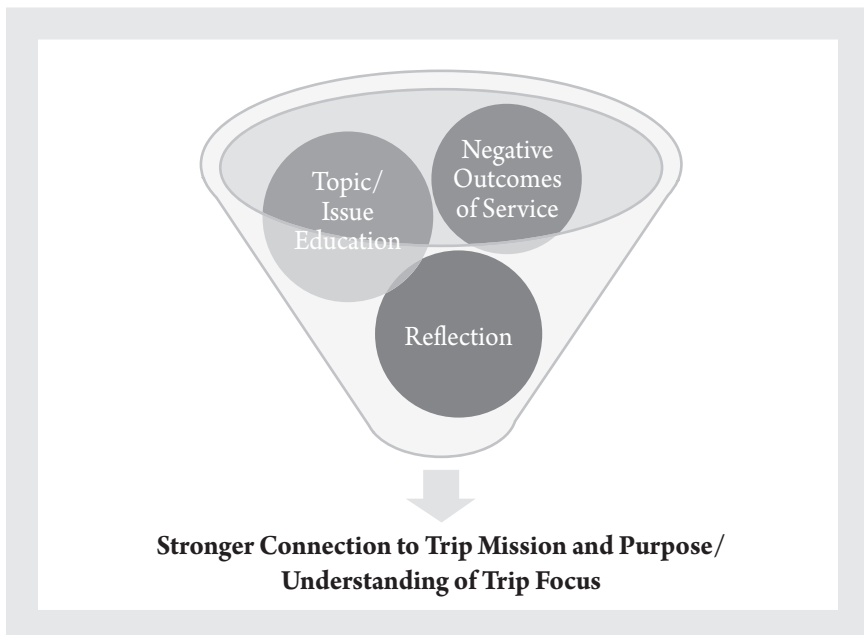
Students from both trips reported that as they were learning about the area and exploring what it meant to participate in travel-based service, they understood and connected with the trip's cause and the purpose of their Alternative Break trip. The funnel in Figure 3 illustrates the pre-trip education and preparation stage in the semester. This funnel explains the selection of curriculum in the form of educational cues that enhanced students' sensemaking related to the understanding of the trip focus. Throughout the ongoing process, students further developed an identity that connected them with the mission and purpose of the trip and of what it meant to be a part of an Alternative Break. Furthermore, students felt more prepared for the on-trip learning.

On-Trip Service Experience: Reinforcement of Educational Cues

During the on-trip blogs, the pre-trip learning was brought to life. By applying their learning, often through moments of informal interactional diversity learning, students made powerful connections to curriculum throughout their week of service. Students also attended to the cues that were intended through sensegiving. The sensegiving for educational understanding related to both trips allowed students to draw from the cues given during the pre-trip, in-class learning so that when faced with a situation during the immersive service, students made sense of the cause focus and thought critically as they made meaning of their experience.

For both trips, the common theme or conclusion was that without both the on-trip service experience and the course component, students felt they would not have learned the material as well. Sensemaking occurred through the combination of classroom diversity learning and informal interactional diversity learning. Without the classroom pre-trip learning, they would not have been as aware of larger issues during the service work. This combination illustrated the synergy reached through service and education.

FIGURE 3. EDUCATIONAL CUES IMPACT ON SEMESTER EXPERIENCE

Topic/Issue Education

Negative Outcomes of Service

Reflection

Stronger Connection to Trip Mission and Purpose/ Understanding of Trip Focus

The community itself was highlighted as an important factor for the students' learning process. For both trips, local community guests at area nonprofits were examples of the power of informal interactional diversity learning. The sights, sounds, and culture of each local community were also recounted in many blogs. Combined travel, community, and community partnerships were a crucial aspect of the on-trip experience. For many students, the community was unfamiliar, a factor that pushed them outside their comfort zones whether they were first-time campers, flyers, public transit riders, or visitors to a big city. Students described the on-trip experience in the community and working with the community as a valuable enhancement to their semester experience.

The funnel in Figure 4 represents the on-trip portion of the semester in which the immersive service experience combines with the classroom pre-trip learning experience to create a synergistic sensemaking process for students. Through this synergy, reflection or retrospection serves as a guided meaning-making tool for student trip participants throughout the duration of their semester.

Reflection: Powerful Sensemaking Tool

Reflection was the glue that held everything together. Without retrospection, sensemaking would not have occurred in the manner it did. Throughout the semester blogs, the practice of reflection was paramount in the sensemaking process for trip participants. Students discussed the evolution of their thoughts, opinions, and feelings in their weekly reflections. Students directly stated the importance of reflection and the process of retrospection in their blogs, especially in their final blog of the semester. Furthermore, the variety of reflections and the ability to participate in verbal, written, and visual methods of reflection are important to trip participants. The funnel in Figure 5 represents the variety of reflections that students described as meaningful to the learning related to their specific trip. Regardless of the individual manner of reflection, most students noted their appreciation for the blogging process throughout the semester. They felt it served as documentation of their journey that they might look back to in the future to remember their trip experience. The process of reflection allowed students to pause, gather their thoughts, and synthesize their experience whether in class, at a service site, or during a post-trip reorientation activity. Reflection is heavily cited as an important part of service-learning in the research literature (Porter, 2011; Sumka et al., 2015). Reflection is what makes service-learning a learning experience.

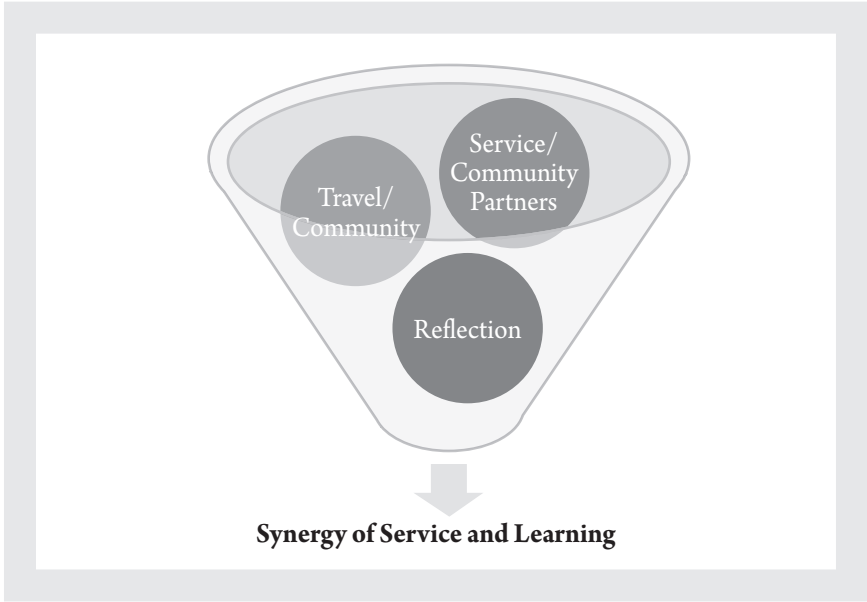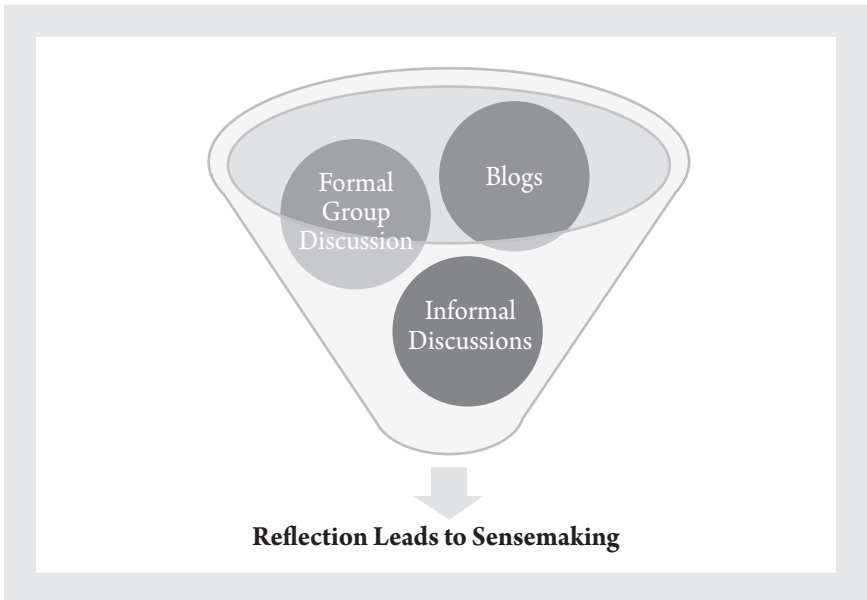**FIGURE 4. ON-TRIP EXPERIENCE AND CLASSROOM LEARNING PROVIDE POWERFUL SENSEMAKING**

Travel/Community

Service/Community Partners

Reflection

Synergy of Service and Learning

FIGURE 5. FORMS OF REFLECTION CONTRIBUTING TO SENSEMAKING

Formal Group Discussion

Blogs

Informal Discussions

Reflection Leads to Sensemaking

Thus, it is paramount that instructors are thoughtful in how reflection is used. Students need clear expectations and broad, open-ended prompts or guiding statements, models, or frameworks to consider.

Moving Beyond the Semester: Future Enactment

Beginning with their blogs on the trip and increasingly post-trip, students expressed their intended future behavior. Goals varied per individual. For the Human Impact on Environment trip, students vowed to recycle more, learn about composting, explore parks and trails, reduce their use of straws and plastic products, and educate their friends and family on the importance of these measures. For the Exploring Hunger and Homelessness in an Urban Setting trip, students intended to volunteer in local pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters. They also expressed interest in advocating for others, changing narratives related to hunger and homelessness, and being mindful of food waste and food recovery. Many students reflected that the experience was a highlight of their college career, the best course they had taken, or a course that challenged them to think differently than they had before. Because of these feelings, students discovered a way to continue their engagement or commitment to service and social issues by encouraging others to volunteer

FIGURE 6. POST-TRIP LEARNING AND CONTINUED SENSEMAKING
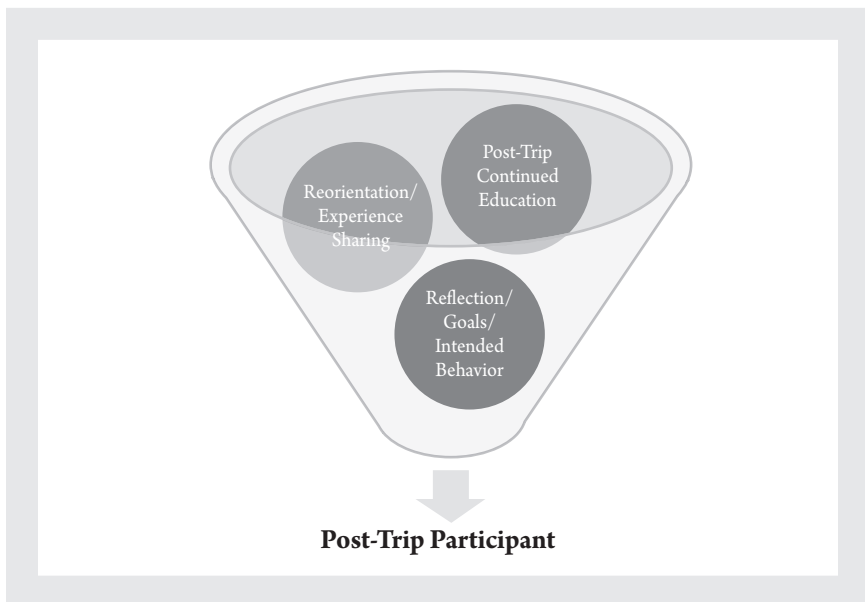
in their local community and participate in future AB programs. Many students who were not graduating vowed to return for another trip in the future. Students did not intend for their engagement to end in May. The Figure 6 funnel represents the post-trip stage of the semester. By redefining plausibility related to the trip topic and constructing a service-minded identity, the way students understood themselves in the first funnel of the series evolved among post-trip participants. The funnel represents that at the end of the trip, the experience did not end. Students in the connected course continued to meet. Articles, documentaries, policy matters, and reorientation projects filled the class periods. In their final blog, many of the next steps were discussed with an urgency indicating that their service and civic ethos did not end with the semester's close but became part of how they proceeded in their academic degrees, careers, and personal lives. Personal growth, evolved understanding, and a connection to service with the intention of future engagement were consistent patterns throughout the post-trip blogs. It is vital for students to understand that what happens before and after the trip is just as important as the trip itself; multiple funnels exist for a reason. It is important to give attention to these timeframes through communication of expectations, well-organized and thoughtful in-class sessions or meetings, and a clearly defined syllabus of the semester (or longer) experience.

In sum, our research shares a passion for service-learning and Alternative Breaks. Continual improvement is necessary in civic work, and we hope that this study provides honors instructors with one example of how we might continue to build on the hallmarks of honors education to meet the ever-changing needs of our students and the communities we serve.

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