

Alternative Spring Break Service Exchange: A Case Study at the Community College Level

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Abstract

The author reviews themes of the alternative spring break and describes a case study in which three Virginia community colleges collaborated on an alternative spring break exchange. Goals and outcomes of the exchange and recommendations for replication within the community college system are discussed.

The phrase *spring break* usually brings to mind scenes from MTV involving scandalous bathing suits and underage drinking. In general, college students are stereotyped as self-centered party animals. Over the last two years, Mountain Empire Community College (MECC), Southwest Virginia Community College (SwVCC), and Virginia Highlands Community College (VHCC) have collaborated in an effort that allowed them to disprove this stereotype. Beginning in the 2004-05 academic year, these three schools located in Southwest Virginia embarked on a new type of spring break.

The idea to collaborate came from the VCCS student leadership conference where all three student government advisors had a chance to network. At that conference, it was apparent how much the students enjoyed interacting with each other. Because the three colleges are only about an hour apart, plans to reunite began. The Student Government Association (SGA) advisor at MECC, Linda Childress, also worked part-time at VHCC, so she was able to facilitate the planning process. Rather than just having the students reunite for social reasons, the decision was made to give the students an opportunity to perform community service while spending a day experiencing the life at another community college.

The concept was based on the alternative spring break that has become very popular at the university level: "An alternative break program places teams of college or high school students in communities to engage in community service and experiential learning during their summer, fall, winter, weekend or spring breaks" (Break Away, 2001). Benefits of the alternative spring break concept have been realized by campuses that offer this opportunity. During a brief period of time, students learn about problems within a community and then work firsthand with that problem. Research conducted by Break Away (2001), a non-profit organization that promotes and coordinates alternative spring breaks, provided the following conclusions:

- Participants show stronger intentions of voting after participating in a Break Away program.
- Participants are inclined to increase the amount of time they dedicate to serving the community after an alternative spring break experience.

The Call for Alternative Spring Breaks

Although the benefits of an alternative spring break are clear, the effort has not been fully implemented at the community-college level, and therefore little literature exists on this type of experiential learning. The joint effort between MECC, SwVCC, and VHCC was a hybrid concept that joined the framework of the alternative spring break with traditional student-exchange programs. Each campus took a turn hosting the alternative spring break while students from the other two campuses made the trip to the host location to perform community service. The following sites were included: the Second Harvest Food Bank in Abingdon, Virginia; Hope House, a domestic violence shelter in Norton, Virginia; and the Richlands Teen Center in Richlands, Virginia. The three sites were very different in scope, so the students' work at each site varied. Having three sites allowed students to engage in three very different experiences, including serving those who are plagued by hunger, meeting the needs of those who are victims of domestic violence, and helping to restore an older building to be used as a teen center.

Approximately 30 students participated in the three-day activity. At the conclusion of the service event, the students toured the host college's campus. This was followed by reflection and team-building exercises.

The organizations that were helped by the alternative spring break stressed the impact made by the students. When a team of 30 college students is assembled and motivated, it usually results in significant progress. Many students shuddered at the thought of giving up their anticipated spring break to do community service, but at the end of the day they were glad to have been part of the experience.

Ingredients for an Alternative Spring Break

Based on Break Away's 2001 research, these eight components of a quality spring break exchange were used in planning the activities:

- strong direct service,
- diversity,
- orientation,
- education,
- training,
- reflection,
- reorientation,
- and an alcohol- and drug-free policy.

A sense of strong direct service was the motivation in selecting the service sites, as we considered it critical for the students to engage in hands-on service. It was also important that students were exposed to diversity through their service. The various sites offered diversity in their needs and the students who participated in the break were varied in background, age, and ethnicity.

Prior to beginning service, students participated in an orientation at the respective site, which connected the work that students would be doing to the mission of the host agency. The orientation was led by the respective site director. During this time, the director led participants in discussion of the history, purpose, clientele, and funding of the site before providing a formal tour of the site so that students understood the framework of the operation. Another part of the orientation process included an education component where students looked at the problem from a policy point of view. Students also were provided with training so they would acquire the skills needed to work in the service site. An example of this can be seen at the Good Samaritan Food Pantry in Richlands where students learned how to do intake interviews with clients.

Once the work was completed, reflection and reorientation were key to helping the students process the experience. The reflection process allowed students to share the thoughts and feelings about their service while fostering team-building skills. Reflections at each campus were different but involved group discussions focusing on how individuals were impacted by the service they performed. These sessions allowed students to connect their communities with the problems the community service addressed. We created an open-discussion format that allowed students to share their expectations prior to the service along with their individual gains from the experience. This time was also used so that students as a group could strategize about how they could continue to address the problems seen at their service sites. For the purpose of an alternative break to be met, students must be able to connect their brief service experiences to their everyday lives, and the reflection process allowed this to occur. The reflection also gave students the opportunity to socialize and connect with those at another community college, where they enjoyed a guided campus tour and a team-building exercise.

Upon the students' return to campus, a reorientation occurred; the purpose of this session was again to encourage students to connect their service experience with their daily lives. By having students conceptualize how service could be a theme in their everyday lives, we hoped that they would continue community service. As with any relocation or deployment to a new environment, a reorientation or debriefing is necessary to help the individuals process their experiences. Without this component, individuals often leave such an experience emotionally unstable and confused. Reorientation exercises make it easier to adjust to the norm after going through a powerful experience. Activities included playing games and group singing.

The final component stressed during the alternative spring break was a strict alcohol- and drug-free policy.

Year Two

The success of the first alternative spring break inspired a second year of service. Although Virginia Highlands was unable to participate, MECC and SwVCC collaborated on the second-year effort, and the sites for service were the Good Samaritan Food Pantry in Richlands and a sub-site of Hope House in Norton. Several of the students who participated the first year came back to participate for the second year.

Student Benefits

The benefits to the students were multidimensional. Students commented on the common threads they saw in each other's communities. They realized that although their communities were unique all the communities had a common need: they are lacking in civic engagement. "If we are to prepare civic-minded graduates, our students must acquire a sense of personal efficacy through seeing the consequences of their actions in community life" (Ramaley, 2000). The alternative spring break gave students this sense of personal efficacy. As Haley Wolford, a SwVCC SGA senator, remarked, "This has opened up my mind to those who need our help, and it makes me want to volunteer my time more often." Virgil Younce, a MECC student, added, "I never thought that community service could be so much fun. Being able to help others while making lasting friendships is something that I will always cherish."

Most college students are under the misconception that they must wait until after graduation to start changing the world; one of the goals of this effort was to show students this is untrue. This sense of empowerment will hopefully fuel students as they continue their education; it should help produce more civic-minded citizens.

Another goal of the alternative spring break was to show students that they can make a difference in their home communities and that traveling a long distance is not necessary to perform community service. Although it is important for students to be exposed to different cultures and connect local issues to global issues, often the misconception is that one has to travel afar for an alternative spring break. As they traveled to the other campuses in Southwest Virginia, students at the host site were responsible for providing a history of the service site. This allowed students who were raised in a community to step out of their comfort zone and look at the communities from a different perspective.

A final goal of the alternative spring break was to provide students with a means to connect with community college students from other campuses. Unfortunately, this valuable socialization is often missed at the community-college level. To date, many of the students still keep in touch, and several of them were influential in planning the second alternative spring break. In the words of Dawn Yells, MECC student, "The best part of this whole alternative spring break was meeting and getting to know other community college students. I like the idea of breaking the stereotypical college student spring break. I felt like my spring break was well spent."

Since the most recent spring break in March of 2006, many of the students have continued to keep in touch and have even made additional visits to each other's communities. Several of the students have continued to aid the service sites that hosted the alternative spring break. One student in particular worked as an Upward Bound counselor during the summer; she was able to integrate a service trip to one of the sites into her curriculum for the Upward Bound students. For the 2006-07 school years, the SGAs have included the alternative spring break as one of their goals for the year. The returning SGA students energetically explained the purpose of the alternative spring break in an effort to emphasize how important this event could be to the newcomers. We have discussed partnering with community colleges outside the region for the alternative spring break exchange.

We encourage other community colleges to collaborate in similar efforts. Richard Santagati (2001), president of Merrimack College, made the comment that "Through these firsthand experiences, students learn empathy, gain exposure to different cultures, and develop an appreciation and awareness of the struggles that some individuals face" (p. 64). Although community college students are different than university students, they do share one characteristic: the ability to give back.

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