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Creating Engaged Citizens

By Tamara Straus

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Break Away connects campuses and communities to promote service-learning trips that inspire lifelong citizenship

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When Angel Garcia became assistant director of the Center for Leadership & Service at Florida International University in 2006, he was faced with an onslaught of requests from students for alternative spring breaks—those weeklong trips where students tutor in failing schools or clean up post-hurricane zones rather than do shots of tequila on sunny beaches. "We had to name the program Alternative Breaks so we could run programs all year long," says Garcia.

Garcia has since expanded the university's programming to include service-learning trips over weeklong periods in the fall, winter, spring, and summer, as well as during weekends. But the expansion was not enough to accommodate demand. Last year, 565 students applied for 260 slots for Florida International University's 25 national and eight international trips. This year 878 students applied for the program.

Garcia attributes much of the program's success to the guidance he receives from Break Away, a nonprofit founded in 1991 to train, assist, and connect campuses and communities in promoting alternative break programs. "We follow the Break Away guidelines to a T," he says, referring to the nonprofit's eight components of an alternative break. They include strong direct service, orientation, education, training, reflection, reorientation, a diverse student group, and an alcohol- and drug-free program. The approach, says Garcia, "has been proven to work."

As it enters its 20th year of operation, Break Away is guiding more than 150 American colleges and universities with their alternative break programming, annually helping 72,000 students volunteer with more than 1,100 nonprofit organizations in 200 communities in the United States and abroad. The most popular trips focus on the environment, followed by ones that address children and youth, homelessness, and disaster relief. A 1991 study conducted by Pushkala Raman, a marketing professor at Texas Woman's University, found that students who participate in Break Away programs are more likely to vote and remain civically engaged.

Alternative spring break programs have been around since the late 1980s, usually as part of college offices of volunteering. But since the mid-1990s the programs have burgeoned and become institutionalized. The reasons are numerous: the popularity of experiential learning; a desire on the part of college students to break out of the privileged campus bubble and give back to society; and the fact that volunteer trips are a nice way to pad one's résumé.

Break Away students help workers in Haiti build a new structure for Foi et Joie, a program of Jesuit Refugee Services.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE LEE

But even for the most ambitiously cynical students, the trips tend to serve as a catalyst. "They come back heartbroken," says Debbie Skaggs, director of volunteer services at Operation Breakthrough, a Kansas City, Mo., day care and preschool that serves more than 500 poor children and that hosts about 300 Break Away student volunteers from multiple colleges every March. "Some of our kids live in shelters, in cars, in houses without water or electricity. The students see that and it has a profound effect. They say, 'How can we fix this?'" Operation Breakthrough has been hosting Break Away students for more than 13 years, says Skaggs, not just because the volunteers provide the children much-needed adult attention but also because she knows the experience "gives the students food for thought." Indeed, Break Away's mission is not so much to give college students a chance to give back as it is to learn about societal problems firsthand.

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FACILITATING GROWTH

In 1990, Vanderbilt University seniors Michael Magevney and Laura Mann were serving as co-chairs of the university's 3-year-old alternative spring break program. Both had become involved in the program by happenstance. Magevney applied for a week of community service in Nashville, Tenn., after he did a traditional spring break as a freshman "and came back exhausted." Mann also had come to the program sophomore year out of curiosity, and had found herself on a hillside in Appalachian Tennessee cleaning up trash. Both got hooked on the way the volunteer stints enlarged their views on the intertwining fates of economics, politics, and culture.

The media were quick to report on these unusual spring breaks at Vanderbilt, and soon other colleges were calling for advice about how to replicate the program. So Magevney, Mann, and fellow student Kelly Mullins sat down with William Aaron, a recent graduate and director of Vanderbilt's new Office of Volunteer Activities, to write a manual on how to organize a high-quality alternative spring break. Still, the effort was not quite enough.

"We kept hearing there was a need for a central organization to facilitate the growth of alternative spring break programs," says Magevney. With urging from Vanderbilt Chancellor Joe Wyatt, Magevney and Mann wrote up a grant proposal and received $50,000 in seed money from the university to open a national office on the Vanderbilt campus. Within its first six months of operation, Break Away: The Alternative Break Connection received $182,000 from the Kellogg and Ford foundations, followed by federal grants from the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

In the early years, says Magevney, he and Mann went to conferences and "learned pretty quickly that Vanderbilt's model was not the only one and would not necessarily be replicable." The two decided that they would not follow a franchise model but urge that colleges' alternative break programs be flexible and entrepreneurial. "That's where the eight components came about," says Mann. "We wanted the programs to be tailored to specific college cultures, but we did say that to be successful the components are critical."

A DECENTRALIZED MODEL

There are benefits and detriments to Break Away's decentralized model. "One of the curses," says Jill Piacitelli, the organization's executive director, "is that we are stretched thin and must make hard decisions about what we can and cannot do." After having moved from Vanderbilt to Florida State University, the organization is now based in a small office in Atlanta. Updating manuals and pulling off training sessions is difficult, says Piacitelli. But the results from Break Away's annual budget of $160,000—which covers overhead and the salaries of two full-time employees—are impressive.

Every year Break Away holds 15 to 20 two-day site leader retreats at college campuses, to teach students fundraising, conflict resolution, and group building. Break Away also annually leads three Alternative Break Citizenship Schools (ABCs), weeklong leadership training sessions for students who run their campus programs to explore such big picture issues as mission, vision, and ethics. Break Away's budget is primarily funded through membership dues. It charges colleges $250 (for an associate membership) or $650 (for an advantage membership, which gives students access to ABCs). Nonprofits that wish to use Break Away volunteers can join with an annual membership fee of $100.

EMPOWER VOLUNTEERS

Create strong guidelines so volunteers can be organized yet entrepreneurial

Leverage networks so volunteers can share information and lessons

Support leadership through special training and workshops

Break Away advises that students—not college staff—create their own alternative breaks. Students on alternative break executive boards designate their issue, be it prison reform or reforestation, and then go about contacting governmental and nonprofit agencies that can serve as host organizations. The executive board also decides which educational materials to read and what training participants need to be effective. The participants, 10 to a group led by two student leaders, must attend five pre-trip and two post-trip meetings. In essence, the student leaders of alternative break programs learn to run their own nonprofits. They do their own development, marketing, public relations, assessments, and fundraising to support the trips, which on average cost $270 per person for domestic breaks and $1,200 for international ones.

For some students, this level of civic and entrepreneurial activity is addictive. Although Break Away does not keep track of its alumni, there seem to be a large number of change makers in their ranks, especially among those who attained alternative break leadership positions. "I did an alternative spring break every year in college; I was converted by it," says Krista Donaldson, who graduated from Vanderbilt in 1995 and went on to a career in international development. She now runs D-Rev, a nonprofit design firm and technology incubator that creates affordable products for the developing world. Donaldson's fellow alternative break leader, Michael MacHarg, also found a vocation in helping others. He served as an associate director of the Institute for OneWorld Health, the first nonprofit pharmaceutical company, and now heads business development at the sustainable energy developer Simpa Networks. Donaldson and MacHarg point to a few dozen fellow students from their Vanderbilt days for whom alternative spring break was a springboard for careers in social change.

Break Away remains in growth mode. The number of alternative breaks organized by chapter schools jumped by 20 percent in 2010, with international trips growing 10 percent. Recently, the organization formed an initiative called the Haiti Compact with American University, the College of William & Mary, Indiana University, Loyola Marymount University, and the University of Maryland to organize alternative breaks to Haiti. In January, Melody Porter from William & Mary and seven students who passed the rigorous application process will make a second trip to Haiti to work with two nonprofits: the Mennonite Central Committee and International Child Care. Porter's expectation for the trip: "We're going to receive a lot more than we give. We're there to learn. The goal here is to create lifelong advocates for Haiti." ■