

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: ALTERNATIVE BREAKS: ADVISING STUDENTS ON WEEK LONG SERVICE PROJECTS

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Issue(s) Being Addressed:

AmeriCorps*VISTAs may serve as advisors on Alternative Break trips as some colleges and universities request that they participate. To effectively act as leaders, they will need the knowledge and skills to survive a week of intense service.

Actions to Consider:

Alternative Break trips are an amazing way to learn about a social issue and address that issue first hand. Over the past years, these week-long service trips have been gaining popularity as more colleges are supporting them. Advising Alternative Break trips allows for complete immersion in service for a week-long period. It is a great chance to learn more about college students and how they act outside the walls of academia. The basic qualifications for advising are simple:

- Demonstrate excitement for service and interaction with students
- Be a positive role model
- Possess advising skills—ability to work within changing group dynamics
- Be willing to share openly during reflection to support student learning and growth
- Possess decision making skills
- Demonstrate ability and willingness to assist student leaders in holding participants accountable to all applicable rules and policies.

Typically students plan the projects, but throughout the planning process advisors should be kept up to date with lodging, transportation, and work site information. Student leaders and advisors should work closely to ensure that all items, both logistical and educational, are addressed before the group leaves. Advisors should attempt to get to know their group before they leave by attending orientation meetings and engaging in group bonding activities. While on the trip, the advisor has many responsibilities which include but are not limited to:

- Supporting student leaders in their leadership role
- Following all applicable rules and policies
- Offering insight, education, and thought-provoking questions about the trip issue
- Participating fully – serve, reflect, and bond with leader(s) and participants
- Modeling, acting as the college staff representative on-site with the group
- Having an open mind, with a positive attitude
- Having FUN!!!

Each service trip is very unique and holds many highlights and challenges. A unique part of being an advisor is being able to guide college students through this intense service experience. It is really eye opening to see how each student deals with challenges in a different way and how much each can grow in just a short amount of

time. Also, experiencing a new way of life, even if it is only for a week, can give you a new perspective on life at home. Challenges mostly occur due to exhaustion and tension between students, but are a part of trips. Keep in mind too, if you are in an area of tourism it is important to remind the students that they are there for service not to go sight seeing. Both highlights and challenges make each service trip a unique experience.

Outcome Achieved:

Although these qualifications and responsibilities seem simple, please remember that being immersed in a completely different setting for a week can be very educational but also wearing on not only the students but the advisor. Just remember that the social issues being addressed and the service being performed will be more rewarding than imagined. Being able to expose students to civic engagement early in their college experience is one of the ways to create life long citizens committed to serving their community, the nation, and the world around them.