Building a Movement for Justice

Short-Term Programs Abroad

The world needs students who are equipped with the skills to actively fight injustice and build community. International alternative breaks—short-term, student-led trips that enable participants to explore social justice and environmental issues at their root—enable students to do just that, focusing their good intentions and altruistic desires on constructive and movement-building endeavors.

In short, as they learn from inspirational community leaders through direct engagement, they learn to become active citizens in their communities, harnessing their energy, curiosity, and resources in ways that provide for deep learning, relationship building across borders, and continued action and social change. This same model can also be used to enhance longer-term travel, including semester- and year-abroad programs, which can boost learning and impact and provide students with a more authentic experience that engages more deeply with the host community.

A well-structured alternative break is a powerful transformative learning experience that sparks motivation long after the travel is completed. When students are challenged to think about social justice, oppression, inequalities, and environmental destruction, the time they spend studying or volunteering abroad will help ignite a curiosity about social justice issues that can have profound impact on students.

Take the 10-day trip I went on with students to Bethlehem, spoke with radical right-wing Jewish settlers on the West Bank, visited the Ibrahimi Mosque/Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, walked the halls of Birzeit University in Ramallah, sang protest songs with young Israeli conscientious objectors, laughed with a Sufi imam in his living room, cleaned up a garden at a school in a Palestinian village, listened to civil rights lawyers in Haifa, met nonviolence leaders at the Carter Center, marveled at the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall, and spent hours each night hashing out and reflecting on what we had learned each day. We all came away with more questions than answers, but nonetheless with a deeper understanding of and desire to continue engaging with this seemingly intractable conflict.

Alternative breaks have an impact well beyond the scheduled trip dates, with participants immersing themselves in the issues before departure and benefiting from their new insights upon their return. To prepare for trips, students spend time during the preceding semester learning about relevant social justice issues, receiving orientation about the community they will visit, and completing training on necessary skills. Some schools may structure the learning around the United Nations’ sustainable development goals (including no poverty, zero hunger, quality education, gender equality, and climate action) or from commonly explored social issues such as the environment, housing and homelessness, health, youth development, immigration and refugees, disaster relief, and ableism/disabilities.

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What Does a Focus on Justice Mean?

A focus on justice means that each trip has a strong learning component and a social issue as a theme to ground the inquiry and guide the direct service work.

A focus on justice means acknowledging and addressing power disparities and systems of oppression. There are inherent power inequalities when students from the wealthy Global North travel to the lower-income Global South, given the histories of colonialism, covert wars, racism, slavery, debt burdens, resource extraction, and exploitation of labor. Students should learn about the darker sides of history, speak to people from their host countries before the trip begins, and open themselves to humility in order to recognize they have much to learn from the wise people they might otherwise think they are going to “help.”

Ideally, students should engage in truly immersive, solidarity-based learning that can be meaningful both for the students and for the communities and partners they engage with.

Letting Students Lead Enhances Learning

A unique aspect of alternative breaks is that they are student-run. With the right guidance, training, and oversight, student leaders have the maturity, determination, and energy to reach out to community-based organizations, to organize the logistics and safety components, to conduct outreach and orientation on campus, and to lead thoughtful and critical reflection on their communities and have the skills and knowledge to address the issues we face. They learn that communities are stronger when people work together.

References:
For more about global service-learning for justice and training tips by Yale’s Creating Alternatives Breaks on Catalyst for Global Learning, Shared Leadership, and Social Change: https://www mirrors.brandeis.edu/Rosenthal/Books.pdf

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