

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 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 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 explore the complexities of the Israeli and Palestinian grassroots peace movements. We met with rabbis who work for human rights, toured the barrier that separates neighborhoods in Jerusalem, spent several nights with warm and generous homestay families in

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's 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.

In partnership with community-based organizations, students determine what they will be doing in the communities they visit. While abroad, participants may engage in four to five stakeholder meetings a day and



Students met with a Sufi imam in his living room in Jerusalem during their 10-day trip to explore the complexities of the Israeli and Palestinian grassroots peace movements

practice critical reflection each night. I have witnessed student leaders sitting down with community activists in Colombia fighting for human rights, with women leaders in Haiti creating a better life through microfinance, with indigenous leaders in Ecuador protecting their water and their land, with Burmese democracy leaders in exile in Thailand, and with Dalit-rights educators working to end caste-based discrimination in India. These students witnessed and facilitated progress on such diverse and meaningful change as the peace accords in Colombia, women's empowerment in Haiti, and the possibility for the National League for Democracy gaining power in Burma. None of these trips lasted more than three weeks, but all of them had a lasting and meaningful educational impact on the student participants.

Upon their return to their home universities, student leaders continue their involvement in the

work conducted abroad. Some form student clubs that address the issues they encountered on their trip, taking relevant action in their home communities or returning to their host communities to continue direct engagement. They may even ultimately seek careers in human rights, social entrepreneurship, teaching, or government service, thereby parlaying the short-term trips into prolonged active citizenship, both locally and globally.

The key is a focus on justice. With a strong social justice component, these short-term abroad programs can be a tremendous force to train student leaders in the skills needed to address social issues at their foundations and support communities. Without such a focus, these trips can sometimes become little more than tourism, neither changing the students nor supporting the communities visited.

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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. We need a dramatic shift away from well-intentioned volunteerism in favor of critical service-learning that focuses on systems of oppression and underlying structures of inequality with the aim of building global solidarity networks across borders. This is more sustainable and respectful of the communities that provide the locus for these important student learning experiences.

Finding Partners, Not Sites

Alternative breaks rely on strong, mutually beneficial community partnerships with organizations embedded in the host communities. These partnerships must be collaborative with the relationships defined in large part by the community, not by the visitors. Global service-learning may appropriately include activism, so long as the activism is initiated led by the community. Some communities may simply request that students listen and learn and

become allies and advocates by retelling stories of the community’s struggle. An incredibly powerful reciprocal relationship can develop when students continue their engagement by bringing the learning back home. The deepest learning occurs when participants are encouraged to reframe the experience as a long-term commitment to global citizenship, education, and solidarity.

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

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practice before, during, and after the trip. Student leadership does not preclude faculty or administrator support and academic engagement but enhances the experience, leadership, and ownership. Such alternative breaks have the potential to create global citizens who are active in their communities and have the skills and knowledge to address the issues we face. They learn that communities are stronger when people work together. ■

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REFERENCES:

- For more about global service-learning for justice, read *Working Side By Side: Creating Alternative Breaks as Catalysts for Global Learning, Student Leadership, and Social Change*
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