The authors of the newly released book, *Working Side by Side: Creating Alternative Breaks as Catalysts for Global Learning, Student Leadership, and Social Change*, have not only captured a moment when global service-learning (GSL) is on the rise, but they have reminded us that alternative breaks (ABs) represent a significant and unique contribution to the service-learning (SL) and GSL fields.

With 53 combined years of working with communities and college students, the authors of this book approach the topic with a broad purview and lived experience in the field that gives the reader both summative “best practice” insights as well as practical considerations (aka, “street cred”). Perhaps more impressive is that the authors have managed to maintain diverse yet unified voices which lend richness and cohesion to the book. Shoshanna Sumka, assistant director for Global Learning and Leadership and AB program director at American University, grew up with a family culture of advocacy, and was influenced by her overseas experiences. Melody Porter, the associate director of community engagement at the College of William and Mary, brings depth and insight gained from training in theology as well as years of social justice work in both Philadelphia and South Africa. Jill Piacitelli, the co-executive director at Vanderbilt’s Break Away Program, grew up in a small, thriving community and was influenced by service-learning in college. The three authors, despite divergent paths to their professional work with ABs, come together to guide AB program administrators and student leaders to move beyond direct service/charity models and adopt a justice-based model along with other best practices in the field.

ABs, often taking place during a college’s spring break period, are immersive service experiences varying in terms of distance traveled from campus and program duration. They may be domestic or international, and while invariably student-led, may have university program advisors. Regardless of these varying factors, the authors note that there are four key foci setting ABs apart from other service experiences and keeping them solidly centered on social justice work: active citizenship, quality program design, examination of root causes and systems, and mutually beneficial community partnerships.

Due to their usually brief duration, AB experiences are often seen as stepping-stones to whet a student’s appetite for deeper, more meaningful community engagement found in semester-long or even year-long experiences. With a few notable exceptions – the National Survey of Alternative Breaks (Niehaus, 2012), student leadership development (Dugan & Komives, 2007), and research that addresses the importance of structure more than immersion duration for fostering student development (Bowman, Brandenberger, Mick, & Toms, 2010) – ABs have not been given the same scholarly attention as longer-term service experiences. Consequently, the dearth of research has left the scope and depth of knowledge around ABs significantly behind other SL models. However, this book does not treat ABs as stepping-stones but as worthwhile endeavors in their own rights:

Alternative breaks build authentic relationships and facilitate learning for participants and community members that will lead to long-term change. There is immeasurable benefit from hearing different voices in the community, including learning about the complex social issues and taking action to change unequal systems. (p. 3)

*Working Side by Side* is an ambitious undertaking, attempting to place ABs alongside serious scholarship of global learning, student leadership, and social
change. The authors have delivered a holistic and comprehensive guide that succeeds in giving ABs the same importance as the more established SL models including GSL and community-based research (CBR).

The Need for the Book

When I began my first post with AB seminar courses at the University of Notre Dame in 2008, resources for training were scarce. As with many program directors, I reported to work the first day with hopes that my arsenal of real-world experience, knowledge, and theories of education, as well as a deep commitment to students and social justice education, would help make a positive contribution to the student learning process. It wasn’t long before I stumbled out of an AB student leader meeting feeling bewildered and wondering where to turn for resources to improve the preparation, service immersion, and re-entry process for AB students. Back then, a Yahoo search only returned institution-specific student training manuals, mostly filled with decision-making trees, travel check-lists, and outdated college policies. A wide-ranging resource of theory and practice for social justice education, particularly tailored toward ABs, was not to be found.

It is into this space that Working Side by Side enters. The authors have produced a volume that goes beyond basic facilitation tips to include pedagogies of justice, consideration of ethical partnership principles, and careful cultivation of positive outcomes for both students and communities, all through the lens of power and privilege.

From the opening dedication to the final section on a Call to Action, the authors view the power of relationships as catalytic for successful social change-oriented AB programs. The book covers an expansive array of topics, treating each in a summative way by providing a general definition and overview of the important themes as well as pointing readers to more in-depth resources and references for further engagement with individual topics. At times this can leave the reader longing for a more detailed discussion of the particular topic, yet it allows the authors to cover a dizzying amount of ground in the six parts of the book:

(a) Foundations; (b) Key Components of ABs; (c) Student Leadership, Learning, and Transformation; (d) Developing and Strengthening AB Programs; (e) Going Global; and (f) Society of Active Citizens.

Contents

Although the book is designed and reads more like a training manual than a narrative on ABs, the first section, “Foundations,” provides a basic overview and understanding of the AB paradigm and its value. Chapters 1 and 2 are dedicated to defining the space inhabited by ABs, including a section that differentiates it from SL and CBR. The authors connect ABs to the community engagement family but also distinguish their particular function by drawing clear paradigmatic boundaries:

While ABs connect rigorous education to meaningful community service, they are not the same as for-credit, classroom-based service-learning but are instead co-curricular service-learning. They incorporate the main elements of service-learning (experiential education, addressing needs, promoting learning, and incorporating reflection and reciprocity) but are unique because they are student-led and are frequently offered without academic credit. (p. 16)

While the authors also note that ABs may have a curricular component and be a form of global learning (because they sometimes take place internationally), the boundaries established by the authors also explain why limited scholarly attention has been given to ABs. Prior to this delineation, ABs were historically subsumed under SL and the broader field of higher education, missing the opportunity to understand how the unique AB program factors (e.g., student-led and non-credit bearing) affect student learning and communities.

Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli also uncover a hidden gem in this section: the history of student leadership and mobilization for social action. The authors posit that Vanderbilt’s Break Away (BA) program was the original prototype for student-led experiences, which then spread to other campuses and eventually led students to found Break Away as a national organization. Though Vanderbilt is treated as the original AB site by the authors, the AB creation story may not be so clear-cut. According to a Vanderbilt history professor, while BA’s fledgling operations began as early as the 1960’s, the program did not officially organize until 1991. Other AB historical markers include Boston College’s claim to have had one of the first alternative spring breaks (ASB) in 1978, and the University of Notre Dame’s Office of Volunteer Services’ alternative service excursions in 1972, with an official academic AB program beginning in 1983. Vanderbilt’s institutional support and on-going growth may be an exemplar; consequently, significant content in Working Side by Side is based on Vanderbilt’s program.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe a theoretical framework for a justice-centered approach and community-driven partnerships. The authors describe justice versus charity continuums with a list of key elements to consider while establishing ethical community partnerships. Specific considerations for reciprocity are
noted along with tips for how to train participants in this paradigm and how to set up economic justice and sustainability in program practices. The final section of Part 1 introduces ABs as catalysts of active citizenship, an often neglected aspect of collective action.

Part 2 of the book introduces eight key components of a well-designed AB program: issue education, skill training, orientation to the host site, strong direct service, critical reflection, reorientation/re-entry, social justice and diversity principles, and alcohol/drug-free programs. AB teams spend months preparing for their experience by educating themselves about the social issue behind their service projects, the host organization, and the community with which they serve. These interconnected components (discussed in Chapters 7-14) represent a preparatory framework and “work independently and in conjunction to help realize student transformation and positive change in communities” (p. 83).

Part 3 moves toward understanding the unique contribution of student leadership, an important distinguishing feature of ABs. In this section, the authors answer the question, “why are student leadership opportunities important?” They introduce the Social Change Model of Leadership and how to cultivate a strong team. Chapter 17 in this section provides a helpful guide to training student leaders and demarcating roles and responsibilities of each team member. Chapter 18 presents a surface level view of assessment—a brief yet impressive introduction of terms, surveys, and purposes.

In Part 4, *Working Side by Side* becomes a true how-to manual with the nuts and bolts of “Developing and Strengthening AB programs.” The section takes a long view in strategic planning, leadership, and building community. Chapter 20 introduces group development and tools to build community, including generous coverage of Bruce Tuckman’s five phases of group development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (or transforming). The section concludes with guidelines for recruiting and selecting leaders and participants (Chapter 21) and the ins-and-outs of budgeting (Chapter 22) and risk management (Chapter 23).

Part 5 (Going Global) explores the unique aspects of ABs in an international context. Along with discussions of unique issues related to ethical partnerships and global citizenship, the authors present an overview of basic culture-crossing techniques and personal guideposts—a necessary section for this book to be used as a student-leader training manual.

Finally, Part 6 casts a vision for “A Society of Active Citizens” within and through an AB program. Chapter 27 offers case studies of ABs focused on Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haiti earthquake as a means of highlighting collaborative work through compacts and collectives. The final chapter (28) considers communities of proximity and affinity as a means for active citizenship. It also claims the power of alumni for on-going AB support, both financially and as a resource for students seeking graduate or professional school, an internship, or employment. The final epilogue puts forth a call to action and reminds the reader it is not enough to share a vision for society and justice: “In the end, alternative break programs must reach for a higher standard of community engagement to mobilize a sharp, results-oriented movement that truly change the way things are done” (p. 356).

**Key Contributions and Uses**

The contribution of this book goes beyond a mere compilation of best practices and summative knowledge. The collection of synthesized overviews, bullet points, and diagrams offers a brief survey of global citizenship, student learning outcomes, and assessment—as well as a readers’ guide to authoritative resources. There is even a particularly helpful section on risk management and fund raising. *Working Side by Side* has not only included a gestalt of established pedagogies and student leadership models, it has provided a comprehensive treatment of all aspects of student learning into one manual. This one-stop approach is unique and timely.

In addition, given the authors’ view that community building and reciprocity are foundational to ABs, they have included domestic community capacity-building strategies such as asset-based community development (developed by Kretzmann and McKnight in the 1990’s in U.S. urban locales), as well as newly evolving issues in GSL, such as negative community impact, which has received a fair amount of attention in recent literature (Crabtree, 2013; Hartman & Kiely, 2014a; Toms, 2015; Wood, Banks, Galardi, Koehn, & Schroeder, 2011). Introducing this concern in an effective and winsome way, the authors include an article from the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, to help capture the often negative reviews of ABs:

> Although they expressed gratitude for the well-intentioned aid, hurricane victims said they were concerned that some of the newly constructed homes deviated from the original plans. ‘We owe a debt to these students for providing my family with a home, but I was expecting glass in the windows and a ground floor,’ said Mavis Riggs, whose original house was completely destroyed. ‘Converting the new septic tank into a hot tub was inventive, but we really won't get a lot of use out of it. Or the barbecue pit, which I think was meant to form part of the foundation.’ (p. 136)
Discussion of these harms is accompanied by warnings related to “voluntourism” and neo-colonial mindsets in the section entitled, “Going Global.”

Of course, Sumka, Porter, & Piacitelli balance these concerns with the potential for positive community impacts, which are also receiving ample attention in the literature (Miron & Moely, 2006; Reynolds, 2014; Toms, 2014). Although these sections are short and often function as more of an index than an exegesis, they offer an organized springboard for students and university staff.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Working Side by Side has to do with its utility and versatility. The authors have brought together a chorus of voices representing the lion’s share of best practices in the field. The helpful summaries and reader-friendly style of writing allow students at all levels of undergraduate education to utilize this as a guidebook and organizational checklist. Similarly, it can operate as a seminar course text for higher education faculty as well as for AB program advisors. As the authors note,

We hope that these pages will serve as a helpful guide to our colleagues in the AB movement—program advisors and student leaders. Throughout, we have brought together theory and practice stepping between the worlds of ideas and checklists, to offer a framework of shared experience for others who are creating high-quality AB programs. While we have focused our ideas on such programs, they promise to be helpful to anyone involved in university based community engagement and service-learning, including community partners. (p. 3)

In addition to being a useful training tool for AB undergraduate student leaders and program staff, it would also be helpful for graduate students involved with ABs. Finally, the reference section is sufficiently comprehensive that I will be recommending this book to graduate students researching ABs and GSL.

In short, the book is a good investment; a reader will return to it over and over or pass it along to a SL neophyte who is just cutting her teeth on ABs.

Shortcomings

While the strength and appeal of this work is in its thoroughness and versatility, one must note the few areas that have escaped the authors’ attention. First, outside of gaining buy-in and securing resources, there is little mention of how to navigate institutional politics for stewarding existing, improving faltering, or resurrecting dormant AB programs. Moreover, administrators would surely benefit from being alerted to the benefits and cautions related to credit-bearing ABs (e.g., those embedded within full semester courses or receiving elective credit) or to the strengths and liabilities associated with a Provost or Student Life reporting line. It also would have been worth noting that while funding obtained from institutional donors can be quite generous and attractive, it can come with development office and/or donor strings that conflict with program goals or plans. Addressing such concerns would have been helpful not only to new but also seasoned AB administrators.

Second, despite the diverse categories and breadth of scope, this reviewer laments the book’s omission of the decades-long relationship that the social justice movement and the religious community have had. One need not look very far to discover thoughtful and significant higher education contributions concerning religion, social justice, and peace education (Butin, 2007; Slimbach, 2010). As an example, since its inception in 1870, Loyola University Chicago has taken pride in its Roman Catholic tradition and Ignatian heritage through a profound commitment to the poor and to issues of social responsibility and justice. Ignatius believed that it is imperative to act upon what is learned – to use learning in service to humanity. Consequently, Loyola engages real-world experiences promoting social justice through numerous academic and co-curricular service opportunities. This form of faith-based application of experiential education incorporates the “lived experience” into pedagogies that can lead to fostering high-impact learning and transformation (Green, 2014).

That said, it is also a fair concern that religious constructs can muddy the waters of student learning. Nevertheless, there are important reasons to thoughtfully consider inclusion of both “sacred” and “secular” dimensions of learning with AB programs. Based on findings from a large-scale research project conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (2008), today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and are exploring the meaning and purpose of life. They also display high levels of religious commitment (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Therefore, one might argue that it is the responsibility of AB leaders to consider the spiritual dimension or moral development of students in program design (Brandenberger, 2005; Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015; Hartley, 2004; Hartman & Kiely, 2014b; Kiely, 2005).

Third, similar to the process of community engagement, the book’s categories do not unfold in linear fashion but rather overlap and weave throughout one another, acting as both leaven and discord, and reminding the reader of each AB constituent (student, faculty, community). Consequently, the organization of the book makes it difficult to find depth on any one topic in one place. For example, community partnerships makes a cameo in Parts 1 and 2 but becomes
led global health organization with over 30,000 volunteers in more than 800 university clubs, was founded in 2003 by a student and continues to draw students and resources in mind-boggling numbers. However, researchers concerned with community impacts express concerns with inadequate preparation and structural harm when students act beyond their pre-professional health capacities (Montgomery, 1993; White & Evert, 2014). Although the authors suggest that a student-led model is the most stable, transformative, and innovative, they advocate for hands-on staff leadership during initial program development. Consequently, the question concerning student-developed and/or student-led and/or university personnel involvement remains salient and deserves further exploration.

In the final analysis, Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli’s book, Working Side by Side: Creating Alternative Breaks as Catalysts for Global Learning, Student Leadership, and Social Change, delivers a necessary training resource into the hands of AB student leaders, new and seasoned AB program administrators, and community partners hosting AB students. With the release of this work, an important moment has been created for ABs in the fields of SL and GSL. Practitioners and researchers tempted to relegate ABs to “student learning light” or “risky short-term community engagement” should read this book and consider the authors’ compelling assertion that ABs are more than an entry point for deep engagement. Rather, with careful incorporation of the recommendations in this book, ABs are ready for their main stage moment: to move from the margins to the mainstream and to take their rightful place among SL, GSL, CBR, and other transformational pedagogies.

References


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