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Increasing Capacity and Quality of Alternative Break Programs: Moving to a Student Led Model

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INCREASING CAPACITY AND QUALITY OF ALTERNATIVE BREAK

PROGRAMS: MOVING TO A STUDENT LED MODEL

by

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To my wife, Karyn. I could not have done this without your gracious and faithful support. You are my rock and I am forever grateful. To all the students I have had the honor to work with, I have learned so much from you. Thank you. To my committee, thank you for all the time you put into making this possible. To my supervisor, Nancy, thank you for prioritizing my education and valuing it as a part of my work.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world;
indeed, it's the only thing that ever has".
-Margaret Mead

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Experiential learning is a large part of many college student's academic careers. This can happen both in and outside of the classroom, but I would argue that I learned more from co-curricular experiential learning than I did from my traditional classes. Experiential learning opportunities were rich with exposure to the real world. There I was able to practice what I was being taught both in and out of the classroom. One of these formative experiences was when I participated in in my schools alternative spring break program. Alternative breaks aim to be a substitute to the stereotypical college spring break full of partying, drinking, and tans. Alternative breaks give students an opportunity to learn about social justice through doing service and traveling. I was selected to lead an alternative break that went to New Orleans to investigate through service. Our topic was how diverse religious communities react to disaster. Through our service office, I led a group of twelve students to do hurricane recovery work with local organizations. Between service opportunities, we met with various religious bodies to learn about their involvement during and after hurricane relief and recovery. Each night I led reflection where we deconstructed what we experienced, how that relates to ourselves, and what we can do to keep the work going. I had a good experience on my trip, but struggled with the program as a whole. I was offered little support, expectations were unclear, and few components that I could have ownership over. While I was able to practice what I was being taught, I was limited by how the program was organized. I knew that this experience could be better.

Several years after graduation, I was fortunate enough to be hired to direct that same alternative break program. Having served as a student leader before, I had a unique perspective and a good idea of what needed to be done to improve it.My first goal was to give clear expectations and create ownership for the student leaders. To accomplish this I gave more responsibility to the students as well as taking on more work myself. Students started coordinating most if not all of the service opportunities themselves, did pre and post trip gatherings for their group, and had group service opportunities outside of the week alternative break. I created regular trainings to prepare the student leaders, added a fall retreat, and took on assessing if the program was meeting its goals. Each trip also has always had a staff person attend, but before I directed the program, some would plan and book the whole schedule while others simply showed up to the trip; there was no consistency which made unclear expectations for all involved. I created consistency by giving all staff people clear expectations. I lowered their overall involvement to ensure that students had a clear role that could complement the staff person's role. Students were engaged in the planning of their trips and building quality reflections. I continued to see improvement, but simultaneously began to notice other shortfalls such as quantity and quality of pre-trip meetings. Students were supposed to infuse education into their pre-trip meetings but it was clear they needed more support. Unfortunately, I was not able to give the level of support they needed with my other obligations.

On my third year we were fortunate enough to be a part of a grant that would fund two additional trips focused on social sustainability. I was ecstatic to be able to grow the program, but growing a program from four trips to six while everyone involved already

was overworked became a great challenge. This funding was not for more staff hours, but to pay for trip development and the trips themselves. How was I going to grow a program when all the leaders, including me, were overloaded already?

Research Question

I found a possible solution at a training through a national organization called Breakaway. They advocate for programs to be student led and staff advised (Break Away, 2014). This is done by involving a tier of student leadership that was absent in my current model, an executive board. I will research what executive boards look like in this context in chapter two. To test this new model I will be researching the following question: How does changing a higher education social justice focused alternative break program from staff led to student led affect the capacity and quality of the program? I plan to put this model into place to help with two problems: student leaders and I had too much on our plates to be able to grow the program, and second, we were not providing quality education, orientation, and training.

Personal and Professional Interest

As a former student leader of the program, I know what it can feel like to participate in a sub par alternative break program. While I learned a lot about myself, the program was not living up to it's potential as a life altering experience or as a catalyst for lifelong dedication to social justice. As an experiential learning enthusiast, I have had other life altering experiential learning opportunities and believe that alternative break programs can be just this. This personal interest drives me to pursue this professionally.

Social justice both as an action and goal are crucial values I hold. I have surrounded myself both professionally and personally with social justice work and see it as a lifelong commitment. A problem that often happens in the work is that it happens in silos. Like minded individuals with similar values come together to work on ourselves and our communities and we consistently do this with the same people. Many folks are not a part of the conversation and we can't succeed at achieving social justice without everyone being a part of it. Reaching a socially just society requires everyone's engagement.

Reaching both people who are and are not usually gravitated to social justice work is where I can see alternative breaks being impactful. I have observed that alternative breaks attract people with varying levels of involvement in social justice work. Many are attracted to alternative breaks because they believe in service, while others may join because they want to travel. Of course, there are also those who are attracted to do and learn about social justice work. Alternative breaks creates a unique space where all of these folks can learn with and from each other. It is an entryway for folks who are not motivated by social justice to work with those who are to integrate the work into their personal and/or professional goals.

I see alternative breaks as an opportunity to work with a group of students who are motivated in diverse ways and it is my personal and professional responsibility not to waste it. When you get a group of students together who have diverse motivations for being there, they can teach each other about their perspectives and the group has great potential for growth. I want to have an outstanding program that serves as a catalyst for

all people to integrate social justice into their lives beyond the alternative break and beyond their college career.

Relevance to the Field

In addition to my research being important to me, it also needs to be relevant to the field of alternative breaks. While Break Away advocates for making alternative break programs as student led as possible, there is very little research available that supports this recommendation. Nationally many programs are shooting for this model, but there is a lack of research on it. For this reason, my research will be relevant and valuable for the field not just to prove or disprove the recommendation, but to also provide a narrative about the process of changing a program from staff led to student led. It would have been helpful for me in making this change to have examples of how other institutions did it and what some potential pitfalls could be. I hope to provide some of this for other institutions to learn from.

Conclusion

I am confident that my personal and professional interest in the topic will drive me to do quality research. This research will directly effect my alternative break program. I will make dramatic changes to test the student led model and will recommend further changes after the research is complete. Currently, program model changes are poorly documented for alternative breaks. This research will provide an example of what happens when a program changes from a staff led model to a student led model which will be helpful for others who are considering this change in the alternative breaks field. In chapter two I will refer to a plethora of research on this topic to help frame and guide

my research study. In chapter three I will outline my methods. The remainder of the

paper will be dedicated to presenting my findings and future suggestions for my program

as well as future research that should be addressed.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In my literature review I will synthesise the research that is available to investigate several aspects of my research question: how does changing a higher education social justice focused alternative break program from staff led to student led affect the capacity and quality of the program? I will begin by thoroughly defining alternative breaks. My research question involves assessing the change in quality of my program. I will look into how the field of alternative breaks defines quality. This will direct me on what to assess when I am looking at quality. I also want to learn about what different alternative break program models look like. Is there great variety? Is there a best practice for program model according to the field?

Alternative Breaks

Alternative breaks is a young field which has limited amounts of research. In the late 1980s and early 1990s universities across the country began supporting alternative break programs (Sumka, Porter & Piacitelli, 2015). These programs have always had some sort of student leadership to different degrees. An alternative break generally consists of a small group of students (8-14) traveling over a break in school to do service. This took place for one to three weeks (Piacitelli, Doerr, Porter, and Sumka, 2013). The field uses the word "alternative" to describe the trips intentionally. Alternative breaks are used as a substitute to the popular vacation that generally includes drugs, alcohol, partying, and tourism. Unlike stereotypical spring breaks, alternative breaks aim to benefit the student, the community, as well as the nonprofits. Each alternative break looks

at a specific issue through a social justice lens. The break aims to serve as a catalyst for

students to pursue future social justice and civic engagement work.

Compact Model

There is some debate about whether an alternative break can be truly reciprocal

for the breaker and the community partner (Break Away, 2014). In the view of many

community partners, having a group of volunteers come to help for a week and then

disappear can be more work to arrange than it is help. Break Away began a new model

with the aim of making alternative breaks that are truly reciprocal. They gathered several

committed higher education institutions around the country to create a compact (Piacitelli

et al., 2013). Each of the five institutions agreed to strive to send an alternative break to

Haiti for four years. This model assured the community partners that they would have

more consistent volunteers that would be stable for at least four years (Break Away,

2014). This is now a model that is recommended for alternative break programs to initiate

at different areas of the world.

Defining Quality

Defining which quality indicators are best suited for the program is difficult.

There is a lot of variety in how quality is defined. Many alternative breaks educators

define quality by the amount of best practices a program uses. (Sumka et al., 2015; Break

Away, 2014). The more best practices, the higher the quality of the overall program.

There are eight best practices that are often referred to: education, orientation, training,

social justice, direct service, reflection, and alcohol/drug free, and reorientation. These

were created by Break Away. In addition, these best practices are mentioned together or

separately as indicators of a quality program by many researchers (Celio, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Kiely, 2004; Piacitelli et al., 2013). There are also researchers who identify quality through their program outcomes. This varied greatly, but included student development, student learning, students intentions for continuing the work, community partner relationships, community impact and how transformative the experience was (Celio, 2011; Cooks, 2006; Jones, 2012; Kiely, 2004; Niehaus, 2012; Piacitelli et al., 2013; Sumka et al., 2015). Student learning was defined in many different ways. In some cases individualized learning outcomes were used, others defined learning as how much one's frame of reference was changed. I will continue to investigate these eight components in more detail.

Strong Direct Service

In the 2014-2015 academic year 163 colleges and universities who are members of Break Away reported doing a total of 1,229,903 hours of service (2015 National Chapter Survey Results, 2015). This is a significant amount of time and a large component of alternative breaks. However, the field recommendations to achieve meaningful service say it must be done with intentionality. When looking at an alternative break, people often mistakenly see them as purely service trips (Sumka et al., 2015). While service is a component of alternative breaks and must be done intentionally, it is not the sole intent or practice.

> To make service meaningful, there should be an emotional connection.
> Human interaction, in this case, can be much more powerful than the
> information found in dusty library archives or online article searches.

Through such interaction, participants learn from and work with people

who grapple with the impact of those social issues daily (Sumka et al.,

2015, p. 128.)

To achieve this the service done must be both strong and direct (Sumka et al.,

2015; Break Away, 2014). Service is strong when it benefits both the participants and the

community partners (Sumka et al., 2015). Weak service may only benefit one or the

other. Direct refers to how close the person doing service is to the people living in the

community who are benefitting from the service. The closer they are, the better. It must

be as direct as possible so breakers can learn through creating real relationships with

community members. Strong, direct service creates an opportunity for students to employ

comparative learning. Breakers can compare the knowledge they already have from prior

knowledge (both through pre-trip meetings and prior knowledge in general) to what they

are witnessing and experiencing in the community. There is something special about

interacting with people who are experiencing what students have been studying. This

type of experience is what creates an emotional connection to the work.

Strong, direct service in practice can be a lot of things. It can be working with

community members to amplify their voices, working in a soup kitchen, or building

raised beds with a community partner. Service should be appropriate for student

volunteers to do with reasonable amounts of training (Sumka et al., 2015). Service should

also not hinder or replace local infrastructures. Sumka et al. provides an example of when

this best practice is not followed.

After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, NGOs filled the massive need for medical care

by setting up free clinics--a desperate need for service. As time went on, however,

the continued presence of free medicine and health care in tent camps drove

people away from locally owned pharmacies and clinics, which put them out of

business. Who will fill that gap when the NGOs pack up and go to the next crisis?

(Sumka et al., 2015, p. 132.)

Alternative breaks aim to have positive impact on the communities they work

with and avoids damaging practices such as in the NGO example. Strong direct service

will help the community partner build capacity without making them dependent on

volunteers (Sumka et al., 2015).

Finally, strong direct service avoids doing harm by listening to the community

partner and taking direction from them rather than coming in with an idea of how to fix

or solve the problem independently. When a group of people comes into a community

with an agenda both the participants and community partner suffer.

Education, Orientation, and Training

Education, orientation, and training are three separate components that are

primarily supposed to take place before the alternative break during pre-trip meetings

(Break Away, 2014). Some Educations, orientation, and training happened during the

alternative break as well. Education focuses on the social justice topic that the alternative

break is centered on. This priming gives background and context to the trip. Some

examples of this could be queer communities, sexual assault prevention and reporting, or

disaster recovery. Student led education should take place primarily before the trip to prepare them to gain even more education through the experiential learning on the trip.

Orientation focuses on familiarizing breakers to the location and the interests of the people in that location (Break Away, 2014). They should be oriented to the various community partners, their missions and visions, and the impact they have on the community in that location. This also includes the significance of the location where the group is traveling. For example, when doing a food justice trip in Milwaukee, you must learn about the immense racial segregation of the city to understand the whole story of food justice.

Training is skill specific (Break Away, 2014). Breakers need to learn the skills that are needed to successfully perform the service well and with integrity. This should be led by the community partner since they know the skills best. Ideally this can be done ahead of time at the college or university, but often it happens once the group arrives in the city. This is when most of the interaction with the community partner takes place, so logistically it is difficult to do a lot of skill building led by that partner until this point.

Social Justice

Social Justice scholar Adams describes social justice as both a goal and a process (2007). The vision is to have a society where resources are distributed equitably. Where all people are "able to develop their true capacities... [and] capable of interacting democratically with others" (Adams, p. 1, 2007). This is how social justice is a goal. Social justice is also a process and this is the work alternative breaks does during the program. The work being done is an attempt at social justice.

Social justice seeks fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and

responsibilities; challenges the roots of oppression and injustice; empowers all

people to exercise self determination and realize their full potential; and builds a

societal solidarity and community capacity for collaborative action (Sumka et al.,

p. 95, 2015.)

Alternative breaks attempt to do this work, the process of social justice. At the

same time, Alternative breaks keeps social justice as a goal in the framework as well.

Social justice being both a process and a goal helps frame alternative breaks

(Simka, 2015). The trip itself is a part of the process and thus social justice should be

woven into education, orientation, training, and reflection. Using social justice as a goal

as part of the frame allows it to move beyond the small scale projects they work on for a

week. It puts the focus on making personal commitments to shift structures to be more

socially just. These commitments last beyond the trip and should become a lifelong social

justice lens for the participants. Whatever path they pursue, issues of what is socially just,

should be a part of their decision making processes.

Reflection

In alternative breaks, most of the learning comes from reflection (Break Away,

2014). Reflection is where participants take the service they did and connect it to the

education, orientation, and training they learned before the trip (Break Away, 2014). This

synthesizing is where a majority of the learning happens. DuPre claims that reflection

provides that opportunity for participants to connect what they believe to their actions

(2010). Reflection can be about sharing insights and ways one was inspired, but it is also

a unique space where arguments can take place. Being in such small quarters with the same group of tired people for a week can make people present in a reflection in a unique way.

Alcohol and Drug Free

One of the things that makes these experiences *alternative* is that they stray from the partying culture of many spring breaks which may include drugs and alcohol. Developing a drug and alcohol policy and philosophy within a program is both crucial for liability as well as for the success of the program (Break Away, 2014). Without the distraction from drugs and alcohol the focus of the group can be on service and learning. In addition there are many community concerns when it comes to alcohol. Addiction is unfortunately woven into most communities. This includes within the alternative break group and within the communities that they are visiting. If drugs and alcohol were permitted it could be harmful to use these in their presence or in their community.

Reorientation

The more intense an experience is, the more likely it will transfer back to participant's everyday lives (Piacitelli et al., 2013). If the other eight components of a quality alternative break are met, this should set the stage for an easy reorientation. Alternative breaks are meant to serve as a catalyst for students to become active citizens beyond the break (Sumka et al., 2015). To create citizens who are active in their communities and committed to social justice as a part of their decision making throughout their life (Break Away, 2014). Reorientation is where the participants are transitioned from this high impact experience itself to bringing it back to their daily lives.

What is happening in the local community? What can they do now? reorientation helps facilitate the continued learning and social justice work the participant may engage in after the break.

Reorientation looks different for each program and even each group within a program (Sumka, 2015). A popular reorientation strategy is to have local volunteer programming that connects to the same social justice topic. There is also often an opportunity for the group or individuals from the group to present what they learned to the local community in some way. Other reorientation strategies include providing resources to connect participants to relevant internships or jobs. Reorientation is also a time where formal student leaders can pass the torch onto leaders within the group. The participants themselves can reorganize themselves to start a new group on campus, advocate for changes in their local community, or apply for leadership within the alternative break program.

Program Models

Sumka et al. (2015) suggests that there are dramatic differences in program models across the country, but through my research on program models I found relatively slight variability. For the most part, the programs that are putting out research have similar program models. DuPre worked with a program that seemed to have no structure at all. There were 18 students on the trip and they all made the program happen (2010). Student leadership is always a large part of the alternative break models, but what that looks like can vary (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). Most programs use a co-led model of two students attending and leading all aspects of that individual alternative

break. These students are most frequently called Site Leaders. They tend to be undergraduate students, but have also been graduate students (ACPA, 2016; Ducker; Gumpert, 2005; Dupre, 2010). Many programs also employ an undergraduate student executive board (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). This board provides leadership and training at the program wide level. The staff person is employed at the university and generally the person in charge of framing the experience as well as being there as a support when needed. Some program models have staff people attend the break as well, but are there for emergencies.They are not present in a leadership capacity.

Sumka et al. advocates for program models to be specific to their campuses' specific needs and cultures and also to offer specific models (2015). They argue that having a student led executive board provides crucial sustainability for the program and this should be at the core of any model.

Executive Board Models

The executive board focuses on program wide efforts rather than trip specific efforts. They are in charge of the vision of the program. This is often done through strategic planning, creating and tracking goals, and assessment of the program. They also serve as a mentor for the Site Leaders. The executive board members train and guide the Site Leaders to create quality trips. This is where these eight components of a quality alternative break (strong direct service, reflection, education, orientation, training, social justice, drug and alcohol free and reorientation) are often taught. They are also often in charge of finances and fundraising along with all other program-wide events. Break

Away and Sumka et al. agree on three distinct models for executive boards: role-based, program based, and decentralized (2014, 2015).

Role based executive boards is the model that I had encountered at alternative break conferences. In this model, each member of the executive board is assigned a specific role such as treasurer, evaluation specialist, recruiter, or marketing specialist. Sumka et al. and Break Away claims that this method provides for greater accountability since the roles are so defined (2015, 2014). It also allows a skill based approach to selecting the board. For example, you can specifically find someone who is good at marketing when selecting for that specific chair. A challenge with this model that when one person is unable to focus on their alternative break work, their role function may not get done. Other people are less likely to help the time strapped person since roles are so specifically defined and they may not posses the necessary skill set.

In a program based model the executive board members are paired into groups of two. These pairs lead different types of breaks such as weekend breaks, spring break, and fall breaks or regional breaks, national breaks, and international breaks (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). The pair leading each of these shares all responsibilities for that program. Unlike in the role based model, this structure enables one to pick up slack of the the other when individual time crunches arrive. The shared structure between the co-leaders makes them feel more responsible for the program as a whole rather than their individual role. One of the problems with this model is that the leaders can't be selected on a specific skill base. If you select two great leaders in every way except neither understand how to market or have any graphic skills, the program is going to suffer. This

model is not currently an option for my program since we only offer national spring break trips. There are not these types of categories to divide executive board members into.

In a decentralized model there are two leaders that are in charge of their trip specifically that report directly to a staff person (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). This model allows for a lot of autonomy, the trip leaders know that they have to do that work or it won't get done. They have freedom to make a great trip, but great risk for a trip flopping if the trip leaders don't fulfil their responsibilities fully. This model also greatly limits program growth since more work is put on each individual. When the program wants to grow, one can add more trip leaders, but there is still only one staff person. This person is pressured to do more work without more time. This is the model most closely resembles my program and I have felt this pressure. Capacity becomes limited when so much is relying on one staff person for the program wide work.

Professional Staff Roles

Most alternative break programs have a professional staff person who oversees it in some capacity (Sumka et al., 2015). This person is paid by the university and offers stability to both the students within the program as well as for the community partners they work with through the break. The staff person provides the framework for the program (DuPre, 2010) Both Sumka et al. and Break Away agree on the primary duties for professional staff:

- Guidance for students
- Set the tone for social justice

- Assist in conflict resolution

- Develop strong partnerships

- Recruit and train staff partners

- Alumni outreach

- Administrative leadership

- Maintain institutional memory

- Plan/coordinate assessment

- Support executive board in selecting, training, and advising Site

  Leaders

- Develop collaborative relationships

- Serve as a voice/door opener to the institution

- Risk management

While Break Away and Sumka et al. advocate for this model as best practice, in

looking through examples of this I found that some programs strayed from this. At a large

school in the midwest, the staff person was there primarily for liability (Roberts, 2016).

They mandated the check in and paperwork process, and made sure that the trips were

thought out. In addition the university had given this staff person substantial funding to

hand out to the groups.

While staff involvement can be a great asset for the program, the program should

still be led by students, not staff. DuPre expands on this idea:

My best advice for anyone embarking on a journey like this is to let the students

know that you are there for them, and that you care. Make every effort to let the

students know you trust them and that you view your role as one of support. And remember that actions speak louder than words; show the value of teamwork and service by serving beside them (DuPre, p. 3, 2010.)

In addition to the program wide staff person, more than half of schools are estimated to require also sending a staff resource person on each trip for risk management (Sumka et al., 2015). Educators often describe serving in the role as being a privilege and an escape from their usual day to day work. They get to model and support actions in a unique way, using the real world as the classroom (DuPre, 2010). It can also be a difficult and intimidating role.

Being the adult guide for students in such a developmentally active stage of their lives can seem like a daunting task. (I will admit to moments of panic when packing for both trips, thinking of traveling with a number of 18-to-22-year-olds!) (DuPre, p. 3, 2010.)

The primary roles these staff people function includes responding to emergency situations, supporting Site Leaders during the trip, acting as a role model, deepening learning, and managing finances during the trip (Sumka et al., 2015). Similar to program wide staff people, these staff are expected to take a relatively hands off approach. They support when needed, but maintain that the primary leaders are the Site Leaders themselves.

Trip Leader Models

Site Leaders are the students who run the trip itself and provide the primary leadership during it. These are present in the role-based and program based

executive board models. In the decentralized model, the Site Leader role and the executive board role are combined into one role (Sumka et al., 2015). Site Leaders are the primary contact for the participants of the alternative break. They are on the front lines, making the day to day procedures happen.

While some programs have Site Leaders work independently on a trip, Sumka et al. argues that Site Leaders should always have a co-leader (2015).

Sharing the responsibility, for alternative break leadership allows site leaders to complement each other, delegate tasks, relieve one another during busy times, keep an eye on the individual team members growth and participation, and double the number of good ideas they bring to planning each component of a break trip (p. 198, 2015.)

The site leader role varies depending on if there is an executive board and what their roles are. Often if something needs to be done that is not on the executive board's plate, it is on the site leaders'. Their primary function is to plan and lead each individual trip (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). They arrange logistics for service, transportation, reflection, and reorientation. They also support and promote a lot of the efforts that are on the executive boards plates such as recruitment and fundraising. Site leaders have access to the participants in the program unlike other leaders in the program, so they are essential for getting the participants engaged. One of their main jobs is building a team out of their group of participants. Bringing them together before and during the trip is essential to its success.

The site leaders hold pre-trip meetings to start team building and provide a framework for the experience for participants (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). This is where four of the quality components of an alternative break are taught including education (topic specific), orientation (location specific) and training (skill specific). This is also where the social justice framework is set. Site leaders also implement one of the best practices after the trip, reorientation.

Student Leadership

Many educators advocate that student leadership is the linchpin in alternative breaks (DuPre, 2010; Sumka, 2015 & Johnson, 2013). Staff advisors of alternative break programs tend to be chronically overworked. Because of this, they can only dedicate so much time to alternative break programs (Break Away, 2014). This puts a capacity cap on the program when the staff person is taking on a lot of the leadership. In addition students can connect to other students in ways that staff cannot (Johnson, 2013). Peers can gain buy in for program procedures and expectations. It is viewed as less of a top down approach when peers are the leaders and this gains respect from the participants.

Break Away believes that allowing students to teach each other is the best way for them to learn (2014). They use a tool they call the retention pyramid to show how effective different forms of educating are. This pyramid shows that ninety percent of what someone teaches someone else, they retain. This is compared to seventy-five percent of hands on work, fifty percent with audio/visual, fifteen to twenty percent when reading and only ten percent through lecture. Students who take leadership and educate their peers will learn more than any other form of educating. Staff people should support

this type of student leadership. "A strong program advisor believes deeply in the power of student leadership and educates and supports students to grow in their leadership so the program is a success" (Sumka et al., p. 196, 2015).

Program Development

Break Away has a chart they use to determine the three stages of an alternative break program (see appendix A). They are separated into "Emerging", "Experienced", and "Established" levels. The chart encourages programs to move towards the Established level program. The program I work with is clearly in the Experienced level. Break Away advises that folks who are at the Experienced level, who are working towards the Established level should focus their efforts on strengthening student leadership and specifically the executive board.

Research Limitations

There is limited research done on alternative breaks specifically. While there is some research on student leadership, best practices, and program models I was not able to find any research on transitioning from one model to another or how to introduce a best practice. Without this type of data, alternative break programs are left on their own to figure it out.

There are also some limitations on the breadth of thought within the research that does exist. For the most part, the research that is done is rooted in the work of Break Away. Many of the authors have worked for Break Away at some point, or cite their recommendations frequently. This limits diversity of thought, but also demonstrates that Break Away's recommendations are respected in the field.

Summary

The research overwhelmingly supports the importance of student leadership within alternative breaks. There is limited research of transitioning to a student led model, but it is clear that that should be the goal. It is clear that student leadership at all levels affects quality of programs, but how quality is defined varies. Program outputs are a frequent measure of quality, but the research showed no consensus as to which output specifically or to how it should be measured. Much of the field of alternative breaks uses recommendations from Break Away. This includes the eight best practices of a quality alternative break as well as the program stage model. These practices are both directly or indirectly mentioned as an indicator for quality in almost all of the research.

In chapter three I will outline the methods I used in my research. I will connect the literature review to my research plan as well as introduce the type of research I will conduct. Finally, I will discuss how I assessed the changes I made to the program.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

In chapter two I examined valuable research that helped answer the question: how does changing a higher education social justice focused alternative break program from staff led to student led affect the capacity and quality of the program? The research agreed that student leadership is integral to a successful alternative break program but all measured that differently. Some measured a variety of outputs and many looked at the inputs, primarily the eight components of a quality alternative break. In chapter three I will use these findings to create and implement action research into the alternative break program I coordinate. I will outline how I used the literature review to inform the structural changes of the program. I will also outline what those changes are and why they were relevant and important changes to make. Finally, I will discuss how I assessed the change and and why I used the action research approach.

Research Setting and Subjects

The research was done at a small liberal arts university in an urban area of the midwest. This school includes social justice and civic engagement within its mission and vision statements. The school has three separate alternative break programs. The one included in this study has been in practice or active for over ten years. The program is open to all students though it is almost always undergraduate students who are involved. It is a competitive program to be a part of at both at the leadership and participant levels. Student Leaders go through a paper application process and an interview. The participant

application process involves several essay questions. Student participant applications are blindly selected by the student leaders through a selection process. Each student leader uses a rubric to assess the participant application with the goal of creating a diverse group of people with a variety of experiences and identities. After selection there always has been a waiting list. Of the three alternative break programs at the school, this program is the only one that is competitive to be a part of. All the participants of this study have participated in this alternative break program for at least two academic years.

All of the students has been a participant in the program and many had also been a Site Leader. Seven of the ten interviewed were women and three were men. It was not possible to collect specific racial data, but at least five of the students were people of color and/or multi-racial students. I assume the others were White, but I have no way to be sure. Four of the students had graduated and six were current Juniors or Seniors. Two of the students had been a part of the program for three years and the remaining seven had been a part of the program for two years.

Rationale and Relevance of the Research Plan

Based on my literature review, increasing student leadership in any program is beneficial. Altering the structure of the program to create more possibilities for student leadership is the core change that I implemented. Through this change, my research question aims to assess: how changing a higher education social justice focused alternative break program from staff led to student led affects the *capacity* and *quality* of the program. I assessed capacity and quality separately as well as together. Capacity was assessed by the number of trips the program sent as compared to the previous year as well

as the number of students involved. One of the main concerns I had about the program was that everyone was so overloaded that we could not make it bigger, even when finances were provided and there were waiting lists full of enthusiastic students.

The literature revealed that quality was seen in two ways. First, by the inclusion of the eight best practices for a quality alternative bread and secondly by participant output. When looking at participant output, there was no consistency. The field does not agree on what output is most important. For this reason I will focus on assessing quality by looking at the input; if the eight components of a quality alternative break were used after the program change. Finally, capacity and quality are studied together in the amount of training the program did on the eight components of a quality alternative break program. Trainings takes a lot of time and effort. Before the change, there was no extra time to develop new trainings or time to present them to the students. Being able to include these specific trainings would be a signal of increased capacity as well as increasing the quality.

I chose to use action research to best answer my question. Action research empowers educators to use research as a tool to make meaningful and relevant changes (Mills, 2014). It is a good choice when a person is both passionate about their topic and is in a position of power to make it happen. I am passionate about successful alternative break programs and as the coordinator of a program, have easy access to creating meaningful change. For these reasons, I will conduct action research.

Research Design and Methods

To make my program more student led I will make several structural changes. I will introduce a new level of leadership of students. Through this change I will redistribute duties to enable the program to grow in size and quality.

Staff Led Model

The model I began with had a lot of student leadership, but at the program-wide level, it was staff led. I, the staff person, made all of the major decisions, and drove the vision of the program. Student leadership came from ten student leaders. There were two student leaders per alternative break. According to the research, I would now call them Site Leaders although that was not the terminology that was used within the program. The duties were distributed as follows. The staff person is responsible for:

- Providing vision for the program

- Hiring and managing of Student Leaders

- All training of student leaders

- Overseeing marketing

- Overseeing recruitment

- Managing all budgets and handling all money

- Making all lodging and transportation logistics

- Running the site leader retreat

- Diversity and social justice education

- Assessing the program

- Mentoring student leaders

- Risk management

Student leaders are responsible for:

- Providing vision of the specific alternative break

- Making contact and scheduling all service

- Making contact and scheduling all experiential learning

- Educating all breakers on the topic of their trip

- Attending/leading an alternative break

- Planning and facilitating reflections

Student Led Model

The new model introduced includes a new level of student leadership, an executive board. I redistributed duties to raise student voices and make the workload more manageable for both staff and student leaders. Under the new model, the staff person's duties include the following:

- Providing some vision for the program

- Hiring, mentoring, training, and supervising Eboard Members

- Managing all budgets and handling all money

- Booking flights

- Risk management

Executive Board Members responsibilities include:

- All training of Site Leaders

- Overseeing marketing

- Overseeing recruitment

- Making lodging and transportation logistics

- Running the site leader retreat

- Diversity and social justice education

- Assessing the program

- Mentoring Site Leaders

- Developing new trips

- Making contact and scheduling all service for one to two trips

Site Leaders are responsible for:

- Providing vision of the specific alternative break

- Making contact and scheduling all experiential learning

- Educating, orienting and training all breakers on their trip

- Attending/leading an alternative break

- Planning and facilitating reflections

My hope in making this change is that it will allow myself the time to better support the student leaders, the Site Leaders the time to focus on quality education, orientation, and training, and introduce a larger student voice through the executive board.

Executive Board Selection

I was able to secure funding to make the executive board work study positions. The executive board was recruited and selected by me. I required a cover letter and

resume followed by an interview. It was required that anyone on the executive board had been a part of the program for at least an academic year.

Assessment

Action research is a better indicator of the true state of the program when both quantitative and qualitative data is sought out (Mills, 2014). This is referred to as mixed methods. For this reason, I have used both quantitative and qualitative data in my assessment. I interviewed the students who have participated in the program both this year and at least one additional year to find qualitative data. I looked for change in the program, so by using students who have experienced the program at another time I ensured that they have something to compare to their recent experience. This improved the validity of the research. I gathered quantitative data through program data and a survey. I looked at enrollment data to see how this change impacted the size of the program both in number of trips and number of participants. I used a likert scale for surveying the students who I interviewed. The survey focused on the eight components of a quality alternative break and how present they were before and after the change.

Human Subject Review

When I did the interviews and survey, I was purposeful to be ethical about how I studied them. Each participant signed a permission form. In addition, I removed all identifiable information and used aliases when referring to them. I plan to destroy the data within a year of collecting it.

Interview Questions

1.   When looking at the trips you have been apart of, what, if anything was different about this year (2016)?

2.   What results should a social justice focused alternative break program have?

3.   Were you motivated to engage in social justice and/or service in your local community after the alternative break?

4.   Was student leadership (as opposed to staff or faculty leadership) important to your Catalyst experience?

Survey Questions

1.   Rate the quality of education you received about the topic before or during the 2016 trip.

2.   Rate the quality of education you received about the topic before or during the 2014 or 2015 trip.

3.   Rate the quality of training you received to do the service for the 2016 trip.

4.   Rate the quality of training you received to do the service for the 2014 or 2015 trip.

5.   Rate the quality of social justice education you received for the 2016 trip.

6.   Rate the quality of social justice education you received for the 2014 or 2015 trip.

7.   Rate the quality of orientation you received about the location and community partners for the 2016 trip.

8.   Rate the quality of orientation you received about the location and community partners for the 2014 or 2015 trip.

9.   Rate the quality of the service opportunities you got to do for the 2016 trip.

10.   Rate the quality of the service opportunities you got to do for the 2014 or 2015 trip.

11.   To your knowledge, to what extent was the no drug and alcohol policy followed during the 2016 trip?

12.   To your knowledge, how much was the no drug and alcohol policy followed during 2014 or 2015 trip.

13.   Rate the quality of reflection that happened during the 2016 trip

14.   Rate the quality of reflection that happened during the 2014 or 2015 trip.

15.   Rate the quality of reorientation you received after the 2016 trip.

16.   Rate the quality of reorientation you received after the 2014 or 2015 trip.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the number of students and trips that happened over the past two years. The year before this change and the year after the change. I also looked at the training that was done for Site Leaders and evaluated how many of the eight components of a quality alternative break were present. Finally, I compiled the interview and survey data and looked for patterns. In chapter four I will present the data I collected and comment on themes.

CHAPTER FOUR
Results and Data

This action research took place at a small private liberal arts university in an urban area of the midwest. The program changed happened between March 2015 to March 2016. Data was collected specifically for this study in August of 2016. The goal of the study was to determine how an alternative break program can transition the structure of the program to be more student led and what the effects are to the program. My research questions is: how does changing a higher education social justice focused alternative break program from staff led to student led affect the capacity and quality of the program? This chapter presents the data I collected through a survey, interviews, and program wide data.

Results

I collected quantitative data through two sources. I tabulated the numbers of students who were able to participate in the program before and after the change as well as how any trips the program was able to provide. I also surveyed ten students using a likert scale. These students all had participated in the program both before and after the shift in leadership. They rated the quality of each of the eight components of a quality alternative break. They did this for both this past year and another year they were part of the program. I was looking to see if the students saw a change in the eight components before and after shifting the leadership to being more student led. Specifically, by adding an executive board that is composed of students would the program improve in doing the eight components well.

Survey

Eight out of the ten students rated all of the eight components as either better or the same as the before the change to add an executive board. The remaining two students rated that seven of the eight components were the same or better. Averages for all survey questions are reported in a graph (see appendix B).

The first component focused on the education the students received about the topic of the alternative break both before and during the trip. They were asked to "Rate the quality of education you received about the topic before or during the trip." All but one student reported that the education they received improved. One student said that it was the same. This student rated everything on their survey as a five out of five, on both trips.

The students were next asked to "Rate the quality of training you received to do the service for the trip." This is specific to skills that were learned to be able to do the service. Again all of the students reported the training improving after the change except for the one student who rated all answers as a five.

Students were asked "Rate the quality of social justice education you received for the trip". Students reported again that the most recent year had a higher quality of social justice education than their previous experience in the program.

For the question "Rate the quality of orientation you received about the location and community partners for the trip" eight out of the ten students reported an improvement. The remaining two students reported no change.

For the question "Rate the quality of the service opportunities you got to do during the trip" there was a bit more variety. Three students said that there was no change and one student rated it lower by one point. Still, half of the students reported an improvement.

For the question "To your knowledge, how much was the no drug and alcohol policy followed during the trip" one person saw a one point change and the rest ranked it 5/5 both years.

For the question "Rate the quality of reflection that happened during the 2016 trip" Three students saw no change, two said it went down by one point, and the remaining five saw improvements as large as three points.

For the question "Rate the quality of reorientation you received after the trip. (this could be the Bring it Back Dinner, post-trip service, resources that were given, etc.)" four people saw no change, one thought it was one point worse and the remaining five saw an improvement.

It is clear from this data that the quality of the program did improve. Students responded overwhelmingly that the eight components of a quality alternative break had improved significantly in almost all categories.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with all ten of the students who filled out the survey. Again, these students had been a part of the program for at least two years with one having happened before the program change and one this past year, after the program change. Many of these students also served as student leaders for one or more years.

Interviews were recorded and took between fifteen and forty-five minutes. I took notes during the interviews and relistened to the recording multiple times while pulling more notes and direct quotes. I had four central questions and have found common themes that came up repeatedly through the interviews.

Overall Differences

The first question asked was "When looking at the trips you have been apart of, what, if anything was different about this year (2016)?" This question was meant to see if there were any noticeable differences that the students saw before and after the leadership change. All of the respondents noted significant change that was more positive results in the most recent, 2016, year.

Many students noticed that there was more frequent and higher quality pre trip meetings. Many said they had zero to three pre-trip meetings the previous year, but this year had four to six meetings. These meetings seemed to be very significant to their overall experience. One student who served as a leader their second year said:

> We had more time to work on education, orientation, and training. Before it seemed rushed. There was a lot more education that in the previous year...I don't even remember meeting many other participants before the trip my first year…[this year] I felt like we had a really good vibe and we're committed to getting everyone involved before the experience. We had more time to evaluate and see, ok so, what can we do to get the group to mesh better. Time to really get that down before the trip.

Many people noted that they felt more comfortable with the group because they had met so much beforehand. They noted that this made the whole experience more rich. "We were more engaged on what we were going to do, why we were going to do it and why disaster relief is important" one student said. Most participants expressed that the difference seemed major in how they experienced the program as a participant

> I just loved this year… I felt like I learned so much more. I was really disappointed with the first trip. There wasn't as much community built between the students and no structure...I don't think I got much out of [the first trip] to be honest.

A student who had led both years complained that their first year they felt that they "didn't have enough time to put in the effort we wanted to put in". She wanted to do more, but had too much to do. She reported that her most recent year was a much more manageable amount of work and she was much more satisfied with what she had put together.

Optimal Results

When responding to the question "What results should a social justice focused alternative break program have?" there was a large variety of answers. The most prevalent response was that participants should develop an understanding of social justice. There were many students who also said that students should do something after the trip. This could be volunteering, activism, small daily behaviors, or changing their life direction "I didn't know what I wanted to do before [this program], then I went on the food justice trip. When I got back I started working on a CSA farm". This clarity came

directly from her experience and is an example of what many of the students hoped was a result of the program. Much of these trends align with the eight components of a quality alternative break (Sumka et al., 2015; Break Away, 2014). They touched on social justice, education, and reorientation without being specifically prompted to do so. All of these were priorities in how they measured a successful alternative break program.

Very few students focused on alternative breaks creating change in either the destination community or the local community. Some said that providing service for the community partners was an important result, but only two spoke about any type of sustainable change for those communities.

After they defined their ideal results an alternative break should have I asked them if this was met during any of the years they were a part of the program. Six students said they were met or partially met both years. Three students said they were partially or fully met both years, but the second year was closer and one student said they were not met their first year, but strongly met the second. No students said that they were not at least partially met in the most recent year.

Post-experience Motivation and Follow Through

I asked the students "were you motivated to engage in social justice and/or service in your local community after the Alternative Break?" They all said that when they were a participant of the program they felt some sort of motivation to do something after the experience. Those who had served as a leader though almost unanimously felt little or no motivation to do more after this year's trip. They witnessed their participants feeling motivated and sometimes following through with that motivation, but they themselves

were left feeling an extreme sense of burnout. "I had put so much work into planning and it was gratifying, but exhausting. "[When I got back] I just needed to be done" one leader said. When probed more, many leaders admitted that they did feel motivated to do small things such as keep the conversation going. "Things get brought up weekly, things from New Orleans..it's really cool that New Orleans is still lingering on our minds." Others talked about feeling compelled to continue to educate those around them about the topic and/or location. For the most part, those who led this year did not feel that the experience served as a Catalyst for them to keep doing service work.

Students mentioned many types of barriers that prevented them from continuing the work once they returned. The three most frequently mentioned were burn-out, not enough time, and not feeling like they knew how to get involved locally. Some also mentioned not feeling supported institutionally to create real change on campus, financial complications, health concerns, and other priorities. Many suggested the program build a more comprehensive resource bank on how to get involved once they return. This could be made of courses that connect to the topic, local organizations, campus orgs that relate, internship opportunities, to name a few.

Leaders talked about the post-trip service expectation. All groups are expected to organize some type of service event for their group once they return home. Most leaders admitted not doing this. They expressed regret for not taking the executive board's advice that said to plan the post-trip service before leaving for the trip. No student talked about taking that advice and many expressed wishing that had been required.

Value of Student Leadership

The final question was "was student leadership (as opposed to staff or faculty leadership) important to your Catalyst experience?□" Every student said yes. There were three main reasons for this. First, when a student is leading their peer, the power dynamic is lessoned. Students expressed that they felt like they could give their opinion easier and that it would be more valued than if it was being led by a staff or faculty person. Second, students who served as leaders felt great ownership of the experience and felt that it was an excellent learning experience for them. One student said "and instead of a staff member saying what experiential learning or service opportunities, the students pick it. I think this is really important, it instills leadership and pushes students to grow throughout the year." Finally, students simply felt that their peers were more relatable. They felt that they could really look up to the student leaders and could imagine themself taking on such a role. "I feel more inspired by students because they are like you and not adults who are fully established...that can seem unattainable and really far away. You don't know how they got there". Students relatability was also helpful in understanding their audience: other students. "I think it could go smoother if it is staff led, but students know students best. So they are making decisions that are more likely to be what we like". The few drawbacks to being student led were not as important to them as the benefits of having a student led program.

Other drawbacks that were mentioned was the fact the one of our most successful fundraisers failed this year. This student blamed this on it being student led and thought if a staff person had been in charge of it, it would not have failed. What the student does not know though is because fundraising was led by a student this year, we were able to pilot

multiple new fundraisers. So while that one fundraiser failed, we still raised more money this year than the program ever has before.

A couple students noted that simply increasing the number of people involved in general was very valuable to the program. "You took [the program] another step forward this year and I think it's because of how involved leaders and the exec board was in decisions and that it's not falling on a couple staff members who have to do everything." They recognized that having more student leadership in the form of an executive board meant having more people doing the work and thus that should increase the capacity of the program. They felt that it was "More people pushing the program forward". Another student pointed out that having a larger leadership group creates an opportunity for more diversity within the leadership of the program and that was very desirable to them.

Program Data

During the 2014-2015 school year there were 55 students divided into five groups involved in the six month experience. After switching to the more student led model in 2015-2016 we had 66 students and six groups be a part of the six month program. We increased the training dramatically and were able to completely rewrite the student leader training curriculum to focus more on the eight components of a quality alternative break. This effort was led by a student on the executive board and assisted by their three executive board colleagues and myself as their supervisor.

The program increased the amount of training the Site Leaders received and increased both the breadth and depth of the topics. In the 2015-2016 school year they had eight trainings. The topics covered are as follows.

- Alternative Breaks Paperwork

- The value of and creating pre-packets

- Organization

- Creating your elevator speech

- Feeding breakers and accommodating dietary needs

- Recruitment

- Fundraising

- Education

- Orientation

- Training

- Mind mapping

- The triangle of community service

- Full engagement

- Allyship

- Intent v. impact

- Program Orientation

- Reorientation

- Facilitation styles

- Diversity and social justice

- Reflection

Summary

It is clear from the findings that the capacity of the program increased after switching to a more student led model. It was able to add an additional trip, and more students could participate. In addition, more training and fundraising efforts were able to take place which both increased the capacity and quality. Students reported that there was a dramatic improvement in the eight components of a quality alternative break. They also brought up education, orientation, training, and social justice as examples of what they liked about the program this year. When using students own definition of a successful program, many believed that this year was better than former years and none believed that it was worse. There was a pattern of students wanting more resources when they return to continue service as well as needing burnout prevention for leaders. Overall including an executive board in addition to Site Leaders did improve both the quality and capacity of the program.

In chapter five I will synthesize my findings. I will explain how these findings will be used in my program and how they could impact the field at large. I will also speak to how this process has impacted me as an educator.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Through this research I am aiming to answer the question: how does changing a higher education social justice focused alternative break program from staff led to student led affect the capacity and quality of the program? In this chapter I will speak to the research experience and how that has affected me as an educator, I'll revisit my literature review, discuss my implications of the finding and report limitations with my research.

Research Experience

Being able to take the time to dive deep into assessing my program reminded me of the importance of student voice in the work educators do. This reminder is both based on the results as well as based on the very helpful and smart feedback I received through the interviews. Many students offered powerful solutions when they presented a problem. The student leaders were humble in admitting their own mistakes and regrets. They offered a unique view of the reality of the program. This experience deepened my support in embedding student voice into the program at all levels.

I was surprised as to how close the research process looks to assessment cycles that I already do with my program. I often use surveys and interviews to make decisions about the program, but never write a report to follow. Having this report of the research will not only help sustain the program that I oversee, but also offer the field an example of moving to a more student led model.

Literature Review Revisited

Through the work of Sumka et al. and Break Away it was clear that student leadership was crucial and having a tiered system of student leadership was ideal (2015, 2014). Because of this I went forward with implementing a new structure to my alternative break program that introduced an executive board and redistributed duties. Many of these duties were taken from the myself, the staff person and given to the executive board. Some duties that the Site Leaders had were also redistributed to the executive board to enable them to focus on four of the eight components of a quality alternative break: education, orientation, training, and social justice.

I used the eight components of a quality alternative break as an indicator of program quality (Break Away, 2014). These were directly used in the survey. Nine out of the ten surveys reported a strong improvement in how they experienced the eight components as compared to previous years in the program. When students self identified a successful program, a majority of students said that it had improved. No student said that the program had gotten worse after the change to a more student led model. Thus, the eight components of a quality alternative break program are good indicators of a high quality program. Overall including an executive board in addition to Site Leaders did improve both the quality and capacity of the program which aligns with the research.

The main limitation to the literature review was the lack of a breath of prior research. For the most part, Break Away has influenced almost all of the literature that is specific to alternative breaks. Many of the authors of the research out there are current or former employees of Break Away. This shows both that Break away is respected in the field, but it also limits the diversity of thought I could obtain in the literature review.

Implications

It is clear from my research that increasing the student leadership of the program to include program wide student leadership improved both the quality and the capacity of the program. Student reported an improvement both in the eight components of a quality alternative break as well as using their own definition of quality. The program was able to grow in number of trips and number of students involved.

Challenges

I was able to make the executive board positions work study positions meaning they were paid hourly for their work. While I think this was a good move, it sets up some challenges. For example, work study often has a cap, for us it is 10.5 hours per week. While that worked well for most of the year, we were challenged as to how to handle this during crunch times and at the Site Leader Retreat. We often wanted to go over the time limitation, but were not able. In those times some things were dropped or students were off the clock during parts of the retreat which could potentially set up a problematic atmosphere. While this year's leaders remained engaged in the retreat even while they were not on the clock, this is not something that I can legally require.

When moving from a primarily staff led program to a primarily student led program there is a weaning process that presented a challenge for myself. I had been running this program for four years and had learned a lot from it. It was hard at times to see students fail knowing I would have made another choice in that situation. It was important for me to keep referring to the research. I needed to trust that the benefits of the program being student led would outweigh the mistakes. In this end, this felt true. The

program improved immensely and is set up for success if there is student leadership at the program wide level. Students learn from their mistakes and the larger capacity of the program makes up for these mistakes. For example, the executive board took on fundraising. In the previous year we had two fundraisers. After moving fundraising to the executive board we were able to implement three new fundraisers and kept one of the old fundraisers. Some of these fundraisers flopped, some due to students making mistakes and some due to trial and error. In the end, having four fundraisers ended up making more money than the program ever had before. Even with three of the four fundraisers flopping for the most part, the fourth raised an immense amount of funds. When all the work fell on myself, I was too overloaded to try out new fundraisers.

During this weaning process, it was hard at times to know who should be charged with what. While I wanted there to be a lot of student leadership the program wide level, I still held all of the historical data and procedures making it hard to hand it fully over to students. Because of this I remained involved more than I should have. For example, I tried to have the executive board create the weekly meeting agendas throughout the week, but consistently I ended up adding most of what was on there. I also ran these meeting and kept us on task.

Recommendations

I recommend that the program continue to function with an executive board to sustain and increase student leadership of the program as a whole. Having seen such success in this change, I would recommend continuing the weaning process and add more duties to the student leaders. The staff person should continue to supervise the program,

but rely on student leadership to drive the program forward and for daily work. I would recommend that other programs consider having a two tiered student leadership model with staff serving as support as well.

Through the interviews I also received some general information from past participants and leaders that the executive board should take into consideration for further improving the program. Many student leaders complained that they were burnt out at the end of the trip and this stunted their motivation to keep being involved. Prevention of this burn out should be a focus. In addition, student participants and leaders reported that they were under resourced with ways to get involved with social justice and service work once they returned. While they were motivated to continue the work, they did not have the resources to easily navigate a next step.

This research will be published online on Hamline University's Digital Commons. There it can be accessed by other professionals and students in the field. The next year of alternative breaks has already begun and I have used this research to inform my choice to retain the executive board model. I plan to continue to wean myself away from the program while still providing support. As the executive board has more exposure to program wide process and decision making, they are gaining the institutional historical knowledge needed to function well. Now that the executive board is in its second year, it has gained a lot of this knowledge.

Limitations to the Research

A main factor that could have skewed my data was that eight of the ten students who agreed to be interviewed and surveyed had also served on the Executive Board or as

a Site Leader at some point. This means that the students better understood the program, but it also posed some obstacles. They may have been more likely to see value in student leadership since they were a student leader. They also may have had some bias in their rating because they were leading one or both years. They also may have been in a different position which would make comparing the two years tricky. I am reassured that the two people who had never served on the executive board or as a Site Leader did not have drastically different views of the program. This leads me to believe that the student leaders were able to put most of their bias aside and/or it did not impact the data dramatically.

Another limitation is the fact that I was the one who did the research. The students who took place in the study know that I coordinate the program and care a lot about it. There is no way to assure that they were being fully honest in their results. The survey was anonymous, so I am more concerned about this when it comes to the interviews. Even though I told that all that I would not take anything they said personally and to be brutally honest, I am sure it was hard for some students to tell the whole truth. This is especially the case for students who I will be working with again in the program this upcoming year. There is a power dynamic since I will be supervising some of them in the future. This again could have made it hard for them to critique the program in the what they may have wanted.

Conclusion

I learned a lot from my research. From the literature review, through designing and implementing a new structure, and finally to collecting and synthesizing the data. I

feel confident in the new student led structure and plan on continuing to make it even more student led. The work of Break Away really influences that field and through using their recommendations and measures of quality, I can understand why (2014). Both through my witness and the students who were part of the study agree that having a student led program is a valued aspect of alternative breaks. The eight components of a quality alternative break are effective in improving a program.

There are some limitations to the data I collected because it could have bias due to so many of them being student leaders in the program. Students may have had a hard time being fully truthful during the interview because of their relationship to me. In addition the fact that I hold a professional position means I have some power and this again could have led to censored responses in the interviews. Finally, there were only fourteen students who had been a part of the program for the timeframe needed for this research. Although I had a high volunteer rate of ten students, there is limitations in the fact that ten is still a small sample size.

This research will be published online on Hamline University's Digital Commons. There, anyone can access it. The field of alternative breaks should be able to use this information to help programs who are considering making a similar change. It also may be helpful to any program who is wanting to increase quality and/or capacity. I plan to share the recommendations with the executive board to help direct their work and give them an idea of what others think of the program. If I come across any push back about funding the executive board positions, I can use this research to prove its worth.

While this research could be used to help transition any program into a student led and staff supported model, it focuses on adding student leadership and lowering staff involvement. More research could be done for programs that are fully student led to add in the staff support component. In addition, more research could be done on the skills that the student leaders gain by being a leader in the program. I heard repeatedly in my interviews how much the student leaders learned about themselves, leadership, and various other skills. This could easily be researched in more depth to better measure student outcomes at all levels.

This research has greatly impacted my practice and will continue to do so. Professionally I am poised to implement some changes from what I have learned and I am more dedicated to fully assessing my programs frequently. My largest take away is the huge value in student leadership. Students are capable, smart and able to improve a program greatly when they are giving the space to do so. I will continue to advocate for and support student leadership in this and other programs moving forward.
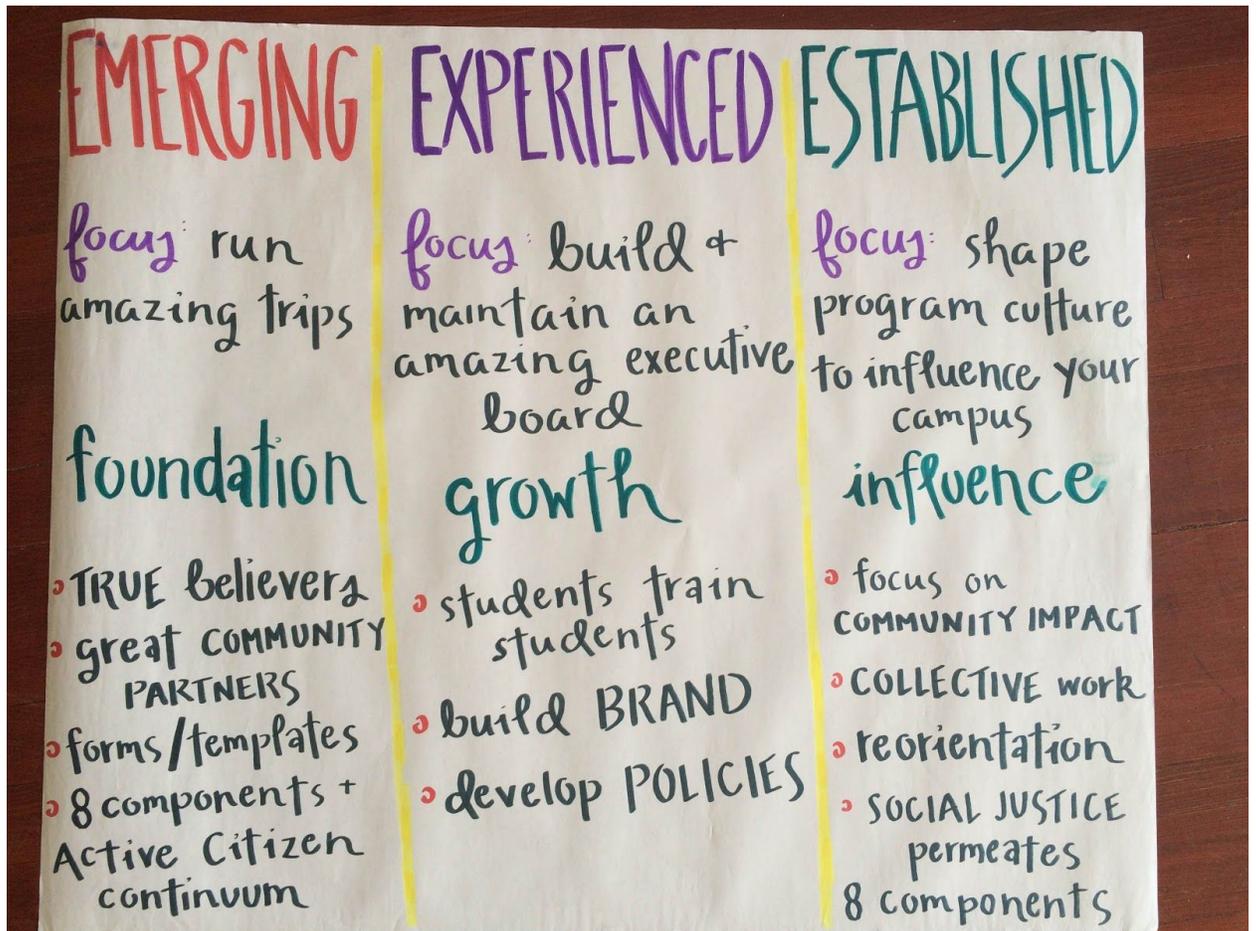
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Appendix A

Break Away Program Levels

(2016, August) *Strategic planning. A poster presented at Alternative Break Citizenship School, Grand Canyon, AZ.*

Appendix B

Survey Results

Average Rating

Survey Data

Survey Questions