# Toward Critical Service-Learning:
## Alternative Breaks at UC Berkeley

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Alternative Breaks is a service-learning program that began in 2001 as part of the UC Berkeley Public Service Center. The program has changed considerably over the last 12 years, fluctuating in trip locations, issues of focus, and participant numbers. Currently, we have ten service-learning trips that occur over spring break, two of which are accompanied by a winter break service trip and a summer internship program in the same location and with the same issues of focus. Our trips visit communities principally throughout California, in addition to trips that visit Arizona, Oregon, and the Gulf Coast. Our current issues of focus range from homelessness and poverty and immigration to animal welfare and environmental justice. Currently, we work directly with approximately 170 students per year.

Each year, we are able to strengthen our program because we stand on the shoulders of the giants who have led it before us. Specifically, our 2012-2013 cohort read and discussed Tania D. Mitchell's "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models" and subsequently, we have worked to grow in a direction that better embodies the critical approach to service-learning she describes. We believe strongly that this approach is the most accountable and justice-oriented way to engage in the work we do. We believe that we cannot effect real social change if we do not understand the systems that perpetuate oppression, if we do not understand and work to redistribute power in the unjust hierarchies that support these systems, and if we do not build deep, authentic relationships within our own communities and with the community partners doing this important work everyday.

Inspired by Mitchell's article, our community partners, and everyone who has been a part of Alternative Breaks, past and present, we have made conscious strides in the last year with the goal of more fully embodying the components Mitchell describes as crucial to critical service-learning. Much of this attempt to practice critical service-learning is encompassed within our program theme, Solidarity in Action, which informs our commitment to taking action guided by genuine community wisdom. This article is our attempt to document and share some of the strategies and facets of our program that best showcase the strengths and limitations we've encountered. We hope this article can serve as a companion to Mitchell's "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning," a resource to other public service communities in higher education, and a continuation of the dialogue focused on strengthening our work towards a more just, equitable world.

## Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning

*I started college knowing with great clarity that education was my passion, that I wanted to teach high school, and that I would probably spend college working with tutoring and mentoring programs outside of my coursework. But during my first semester of college, I applied to go on an Alternative Breaks trip to New Orleans. This program has been the focal point of my college experience ever since. I am immensely grateful for having found Alternative Breaks and for the growth and learning I have experienced as a result of my participation in this program.*

*Alternative Breaks was the first space where I was confronted with the fact that the "social justice" I had talked about for years, in large part through reform Jewish youth groups and teen philanthropic foundations, was not even close to the whole picture. It provided a supported forum for me in questioning my own place in power and privilege dynamics, in exploring different parts of my identity and how they coexist with one another and with those of the people around me. It brought me face-to-face with realities so different from my own, in partnerships delineated by the simple truth that all lives are bound up with one another, no matter how different our experiences. It forced me to begin to consider my own role in perpetuating systems of injustice, to think critically about apparent social injustices and realize that the solutions are ever more complicated than paternalistic and dichotomy-reinforcing "band-aid" service projects.*

*Alternative Breaks has and continues to serve as both a grounding space and stepping stone to my involvement in other spaces that have challenged, provoked, and inspired me consistently through my entire college experience. It is through my involvement in these spaces that I have begun and will continue indefinitely on my journey towards understanding and being an ally as best as I can. Growing in these ways has been central to the development of my personal teaching philosophy, of the expectations I have for myself as an aspiring educator. I don't think I would have experienced this same kind of growth had I been strictly involved in tutoring and mentoring programs, and I think these lessons and experiences are invaluable for any student who aspires to live a justice-oriented life.*
*-Sarah Ducker*

Mitchell (2008) defines traditional service-learning as "community service action tied to learning goals and ongoing reflection about the experience" (50). Critical service-learning, however, takes this methodology several steps further and has the ultimate goal of "[deconstructing] systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled" (50). The three most significant distinguishing factors, she explains, are "working to redistribute power amongst all participants in the service-learning relationship, developing authentic relationships in the classroom and in the community, and working from a social change perspective" (50).

Critical service-learning programs, Mitchell (2008) argues, must acknowledge and confront the inevitable power differentials that characterize service-learning relationships. All too often, service-learning programs are constructed from an "us-them" viewpoint, in which students, prepared with university-level knowledge and experience, enter "broken" communities to "fix" them. Rather, in order to address these power issues and move away from dichotomous, hierarchy-reinforcing ways of thinking, critical service-learning "requires confronting assumptions and stereotypes, owning unearned privilege, and facing inequality and oppression as something real and omnipresent" (56). These discussions must characterize both the service-learning classroom and the community-based components of the program. Service should involve working alongside community members, not for them, in whatever ways they determine to best serve community needs.

Sometimes, these community needs may not align exactly with what participants expect their service to be. One year, our Urban Health in Los Angeles trip participants were engaged in a one-day service project with a free clinic. Their service involved moving boxes and furniture for the day, as the partner had just received new equipment and needed assistance moving it all into place. At the end of the day, some students felt they were not doing "real work," that as UC

Berkeley students, their service should be more "intellectual." Together, the breaks leaders facilitated a discussion challenging participants to question what it means to be a Berkeley student. Does it make us "above" doing manual labor? For them, it was an important learning moment, a realization that community partners are best equipped to determine what is most helpful to them. Spending their day moving the equipment freed up hours that staff could spend on other work, work our students could not do because it required a deeper understanding and longer commitment than we could offer during just one week.

Mitchell (2008) also explains that critical service-learning must work to build authentic relationships based on connection, which work *with* difference and not in spite of it (58). To avoid service-learning relationships characterized by domination and subordination, an environment of reciprocity, in which all parties are learning from and teaching one another, must be created.

In developing a social change orientation, Mitchell (2008) emphasizes that the focus of service-learning programs must be redirected from solely the student experience to a balance between student outcomes and social change. Critical service-learning, Mitchell says, "[encourages] students to see themselves as agents of social change" (51). In order to do this, we argue, students must begin to understand the systems that perpetuate social injustice, as well as the ways in which they are implicated in those systems. Mitchell states:

> Critical service-learning pedagogy fosters a critical consciousness, allowing students to combine action and reflection in classroom and community to examine both the historical precedents of the social problems addressed in their service placements and the impact of their personal action/inaction in maintaining and transforming those problems. (54)

Students must be challenged to realize, acknowledge, and take responsibility for the roles they play in perpetuating injustice. Arguably the most challenging aspect of social justice work, taking responsibility for one's privilege and role in systemic inequity, is crucial to developing the understanding that one can play a role in dismantling those very systems.

In what follows, we detail the ways in which UC Berkeley's Alternative Breaks program strives to maximize the potential of our university's resources and academic privilege to effect positive social change and engage students in what is hopefully the beginning of a lifelong commitment to this work. We work towards these goals through doing our best to embody each of Mitchell's three characteristics of critical service learning.

## A Social Change Orientation

*When I was 13, I was sure I had all the answers. I knew there was always a clear right and wrong way to approach any issue. This naïve assumption was challenged for the first time when I left my small-town bubble in New England to go on a service trip to Philadelphia. There I met Liz, another volunteer, at the inner-city day camp we were working with. The first thing I saw her do was yank a little boy's arm and scream into his face. This was enough to convince my friends and me that she was a monster. Positive we were doing the right thing, we reported her to be removed from the camp immediately because someone so "dangerous" clearly did not belong there.*

*Though the camp management did confront her, they also informed us of her story. She had been abused again and again by people she trusted, and after leaving the last man who*

*abused her, she and her three children had become homeless. She strived not only to keep her family sheltered and together, but also to give them the education she never had. I immediately felt foolish for assuming that I had the answer to a problem I knew nothing about. Although Liz's behavior was inappropriate, I had no right to jump to conclusions about her character.*

*As I have continued to engage in public service over the years, I have realized this is a common occurrence. Often "service" does little more than reinforce the idea that a particular community is "bad," "poor," or "dangerous" because those "serving" have little understanding of the community's history, culture, or the unique challenges it faces.*

*Fast forward to my second year of college, when through Alternative Breaks, I worked with a community health organization in Los Angeles to map empty lots and community resources in an attempt to determine potential future uses for the lots. At one point, we were taking pictures near one lot and a man driving by rolled down his window to ask, "Why are you taking pictures of all the bad parts of the neighborhood?" His tone expressed his frustration with people like us, outsiders entering his neighborhood and portraying it as "that bad part of L.A." without ever giving the people who lived there a chance to advocate for themselves.*

*These moments have stuck with me and continue to remind me that it is not my place to point out the flaws of another community. Every person and every community has a right to define its own goals and pursue its own methods to achieve them. To serve in solidarity, we must listen first and then act alongside the people with whom we are serving. It is in large part because of this program and moments like these that I have changed my career path from medicine to public health and social work. While working with different community partners through Alternative Breaks and learning about their approaches to empowering communities and creating change, I realized I have much more passion for this work than for medicine. I see my path as an opportunity to engage with communities and support people's growth in a holistic way, something I could not do as a doctor. I am so grateful that I was able to be part of this program and that it has led me, hopefully, to a truly fulfilling career.*
*-Katharine Hinman*

Mitchell (2008) explains that the main difference between a program with a social change orientation and a traditional program is an emphasis on service for an ideal, rather than service for individuals. In addition, the social change orientation challenges students to recognize the injustice of systems and use that knowledge to tap into the power of communities and address root causes of the issues, thereby working to create real change. This goes far beyond the traditional model, which functions to meet learning goals and help students challenge their own assumptions and grow as people, but not support change in the community (52). To implement this social change orientation, students first must recognize themselves not only as agents of change, but also as embedded within current systems of oppression. Students are asked to recognize the implications of their identities and backgrounds, how they manifest in terms of societal positionality and how they can play out in the classroom or while working with community partners. This can be difficult for students who have never thought deeply about identity and privilege, and the large range of experiences students bring to the program can make these moments tense and uncomfortable. We support our students in working through this dissonance because we believe understanding and awareness of these dynamics is crucial for students to become more accountable and strive towards partnership with community members and with one another.

In order to create an environment for critical service learning and for students to interrogate their roles in oppressive systems, there must first be space allowing for education about difficult topics and acknowledgement of both the dominant and targeted aspects of our identities. Like Mitchell, we believe that working for social change also requires an understanding of the deeply-rooted systemic issues that have created inequalities and put us in a position to serve in the first place. We utilize our student-designed and facilitated courses, which lead up to spring and winter break service trips, to begin to establish this learning and build upon the knowledge that participants bring into the space from their various backgrounds and lived experiences. While this learning continues and perhaps occurs most meaningfully during the trip itself, we strive to prepare students as much as possible to enter communities humbly and with a solid foundation of understanding about the systemic issues they are working to address.

We find that participants are more likely to find their trips transformative after they have experienced challenging moments throughout the semester and worked through them, both as individuals and supported by their peers. Growth is an outcome of discomfort, and we ask participants to embrace that discomfort, to take healthy risks, to challenge themselves by confronting their assumptions and reevaluating their understanding of the world. Doing this throughout the semester better prepares them for the 24/7 immersive experience these trips entail and better enables them to recognize ties between people's stories and identities and the life circumstances they face. The more students are willing to work at understanding their own identities, experiences, and circumstances, the more open we find they are to doing the same for others.

*Break Leader Retreat*

Our weekend-long intensive break leader retreat takes place during the first two weeks of the fall semester. The retreat includes training around logistical responsibilities, introductory workshops on social justice concepts like power and privilege, opportunities for deep reflection, direct service with a long-term community partner, and social bonding with an eye towards relationship and trust-building, not just accomplishing tasks. It serves to set the tone for the rest of the academic year and jumpstart toolkit-building for the many responsibilities break leaders encounter in their new roles.

*Break Leader Trainings*

After the retreat, break leaders (two per trip) continue training in biweekly sessions led by four student directors. The trainings focus on different topics throughout the year, ranging from class facilitation preparation and strategy to recruitment and selection to risk management. They also provide a consistent forum for group bonding and learning from the many skills and experiences leaders bring to the cohort. These trainings allow for break leaders to deepen their own understanding of root causes and recognize the connections between trips and issues, so that they can share this knowledge of intersectionality between issues and communities to their participants.

*DeCals*

During the spring semester, all program participants enroll in a weekly DeCal (Democratic education at Cal), a student-facilitated, for-credit seminar that meets throughout the spring semester of their trip. These semester-long classes include education about social issues and community partners relevant to each specific trip, a space to build relationships among participants, and facilitated critical dialogue and reflection. Topics also include cultural humility in trip-specific communities and broader social justice concepts.

Our goal is to prepare participants to enter their trip communities ready to engage and serve in productive ways that build community and partnership, and are not harmful to the communities we work with. We take time to address questions and concerns that arise throughout the semester, often concerning anxiety about interacting appropriately with community partners. Our understanding of cultural humility emphasizes that it is a process and emphasizes the humanity of all individuals. We discuss what it might look like to ask respectful questions, to offer criticism that is constructive, self-reflective, and that comes from a place of humility. We discuss risk management as a method of keeping ourselves safe, but also as crucial to serving community partners in the ways they need. The DeCal also offers a space for participants to reflect on their personal experiences and think about what a just society might mean for them, their families, and their communities.

*Anchor Organizations*

In order to deepen our work as an aspiring social justice program, each trip chooses an "anchor organization," an organization with which we choose to commit a longer period of time because it effectively represents the community and its genuine interests. We ask break leaders to consider who works for an organization, how and when it was created, and who has the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process for its projects and procedures. Finding organizations that are run by people who live in the community is an important aspect of the social change model, and it helps ensure that the projects students are involved with are truly in line with community goals and needs. To this end, we have created guidelines for our students to help them find partners that share our beliefs and respect for community wisdom and are interested in working with our students in an intimate, reciprocal manner.

Moreover, we encourage our leaders to discuss any potential new partners with trusted partners we have worked with in the past. As our trusted partners are active in the community year-round, they have a better sense of an organization's position in a community and its relationships with other organizations than we can obtain from perusing a website or mission statement. In this way, we make sure that our limited time with communities is spent with organizations working for real social change, supporting this work rather than engaging in transactional service projects that can only create short-term, surface-level solutions or even harmful circumstances.

*Community Advisory Group*

Making a long-term commitment does not guarantee a social change orientation. We consider the community's input about our work essential to supporting social change. Therefore, we are currently working to establish Community Advisory Groups (CAGs) in each of the communities with which our program partners. We have been working with our CAG in New Orleans for seven years now, and we plan to have CAGs established for the rest of our

communities in the next few years. These carefully and intentionally-constructed advisory groups will offer us feedback on our work and help us decide on our yearly issues of focus, lesson plans, and changes to our housing or community partners. They consist of trusted members of the community and leaders working with our long-standing community partners. Our hope is that this helps us to stay ever more accountable to the communities we serve.

*Winter Trips and Summer Internships*

Social change is also about creating sustainable movements. One of the limitations of our program is that weeklong service trips are not nearly long enough to create the sort of social change we wish to see. Social change is a long and difficult process to which people often devote their entire lives. As a program, we work to commit to this longer process through sustained partnerships. As our program grows and we increase our sources of funding and efficiency, we are beginning to offer winter service trips and summer internships, a recommendation originating from our New Orleans CAG, within the same communities as our ten current spring break trips. In this manner, while individual students may not be making a long-term commitment to our community partners, our program's year-round commitment to communities allows us to better support the sustainability of their work, carry out more in-depth projects, and move past a model of one-time, short-term transactional service.

In making these changes and working to further practice what Mitchell describes as a "social justice orientation," we have come to find that the most valuable parts of the Alternative Breaks experience for people at every level of participation is the opportunities we have for deep interaction and dialogue with community members and the authentic relationships we are able to build with them and among each other. These interactions offer a platform for idea and resource-sharing that cannot exist in transactional service experiences. Students consistently refer to these moments of interaction as the most impactful parts of their trips. As our program grows, we hope to deepen relationships with our community partners and allow even more space for dialogue and work truly focused on social change.

## Working to Redistribute Power

*Growing up, I was often the only Asian person in a given space. At school, I was always embarrassed to bring my bento box lunches and opted instead for the classic ham and cheese sandwich. I often had a hard time relating to others and was quite used to keeping my guard up whenever anyone asked about my personal or family life. However, the spring break of my sophomore year turned out to be the "game changer" that shaped the rest of my undergraduate career. Before my experience with the New Orleans Alternative Breaks trip, I never had conversations with people who were so open about understanding the roots behind personal experiences and struggles. These dialogues helped me check many of my assumptions and beliefs around social issues, people, and the concept of difference.*

*Hearing others share stories about their personal struggles, especially around their experiences during Hurricane Katrina, helped me to better understand structural inequality and what the impacts of that can look like. Being in this space and participating in this program showed me that not everyone is able to live the life I was able to live, and that the reasons for that are not ignorance, laziness, or any of the other stereotypes people make about those who are "different." Rather, structural inequality results from the intersection of institutions and policies*

*and the ways they can disproportionately or negatively impact people's experiences. In the case of New Orleans, remnants of slavery manifest today through segregation, achievement gaps, food deserts, and other structural inequities. I truly came to understand that history does, in fact, matter immensely, as it shapes and influences circumstances that exist today. The Alternative Breaks program was one of the first instances where I started to "unlearn" the way I had always operated, particularly how I understood power and how my individual privilege can impact power dynamics. It was my first step in unpacking what working to redistribute power means to me.*

*Alternative Breaks helped me to push past the blinders I had on before to try and really understand the many faces of social problems and their many root causes. However, trying to navigate through all of these complicated layers has made me realize that I need to better understand where I come from and see how I am personally implicated in systems of oppression. In my efforts to think more critically of the world, I have reflected on my own personal history and become more aware of what power and privilege I carry in relation to others. I identify as a cisgender-woman, Nissei Japanese American, able-bodied, and raised with a middle class upbringing. My path to developing my identity was and still is a slow-brewing process, in which I acknowledge the different tensions that exist at the intersections of my identity.*

*I have dedicated myself towards working to redistribute power because of all the lives that have touched me through this program. I strive to contribute to a world in which everyone is treated with dignity and respected with human rights. Observing and listening to all the various stories from people of all walks of life, in New Orleans and in other communities, has really showed me that no issue is ever black and white. I truly value the relationships that have shaped my understanding of social justice and my ability to ask difficult questions of myself and the people around me to work towards a more equitable society.*

*Having just graduated from UC Berkeley, I find myself in a transitional place as I try to continue to live out my social justice vision against the waves of pressure coming from my family, school debt, an uncertain future, and societal perceptions of what a college graduate's life should be. My next game changer is to move to New Orleans to continue working with one of our long-standing community partners, the Lower 9th Ward Village, to help strengthen the community's ability to return. Finding ways to work at redistributing power is a continual process and something I am always mindful of as I transition out of the academic bubble and into the next phase of my life.*
*-Chika Kondo*

The second component of the critical service-learning model entails working to redistribute power. Mitchell (2008) elaborates on the unseen power dynamics that exist in service, where privileged students enter into communities less fortunate than the ones they came from. She cites scholar-activist Lori Pompa:

> If I "do for" you, "serve" you, "give to" you - that creates a connection in which I have the resources, the abilities, the power, and you are on the receiving end. It can be—while benign in intent—ironically disempowering to the receiver, granting further power to the giver. Without meaning to, this process replicates the "have-have not" paradigm that underlies many social problems. (56)

Here, Pompa highlights the possibility of inadvertently reproducing power hierarchies. These hierarchical relationships can be problematic, as they do not comprehensively address the issues

that make a service a need in the first place. For this reason, Mitchell insists on working to redistribute power as a crucial part of the critical service-learning model.

In order to deconstruct the problematic paradigm that is often reinforced by service transactions, those engaged in direct service must be actively mindful about finding pathways to redistribute power. While a week of service cannot possibly accomplish this, our program continuously strives to take small steps that work to redistribute power in various facets of our work, recognizing that we will always be in process. We do this by recognizing the agency students carry, incorporating advocacy into our work, conducting equitable selection processes, facilitating power and privilege workshops and cultural humility trainings, and connecting trips back to the Bay Area or home community.

*Sustained Partnerships*

Alternative Breaks at UC Berkeley is rooted in the belief that sustained partnerships help leverage the power and resources that the university holds in order to support community-driven projects and programs. All established trips are asked to maintain a majority of their community partners from the previous year to ensure we are solidifying existing relationships. Trips are also required to fill out a Community Partner Learning Agreement with each of their community partners before the trip, which entails a discussion outlining, in great detail, the expected conduct of participants when they serve, what they should accomplish by the end of service, and what the participants will learn from working with this organization. Community partners are asked to fill out a post-service feedback form, as well, as a way for us to measure whether their expectations were met.

As we recognize that we only have a week to serve in these communities and we are often outsiders, we emphasize the importance of "bringing it back to the Bay," so that participants see how these social justice issues relate not only to the communities they serve with during spring break, but also to their communities at home and in the Berkeley area. We aim to expand our program so we can commit to our community partners year-round. This helps to maintain long-term partnerships, build trust, and develop a better bridge between the university and the community. We hope this kind of expansion will allow us to build opportunities for advocacy and better collaboration.

*Advocacy*

We do our best to veer away from service of a transactional nature because we believe transactional service perpetuates power dynamics and fails to address root causes of injustice. We value the wisdom and knowledge held within communities and know that their wisdom cannot be shared without first building relationships. Sustaining communication and building trust helps us to value and give power toward community wisdom and the alternative forms of knowledge each community holds.

Part of building relationships and internalizing community wisdom is then working to disseminate this knowledge and spread awareness about systemic inequity and the work being done in communities to address it. Students who have had service-learning experiences have the capacity to raise immense awareness among their family, friends, and peers. Disseminating knowledge is one form of advocacy that encourages others to begin to value community wisdom and question their own assumptions and beliefs, widening the scope of impact we are able to have as a program.

*Power and Privilege*

This year in Alternative Breaks, we aimed to delve deeper in our advocacy efforts. We realized that many might not recognize how service can be problematized. In a speech to a group of students about to participate in the Conference on Interamerican Student Projects[1], philosopher Ivan Illich (1968) emphasized that a "savior complex" can emerge when service-learners immerse themselves in a community less fortunate than their own, only to ultimately benefit themselves and not the community. The invisible power relations that exist already are often perpetuated further when a service group enters into a different community, as those with less privilege serve the educational needs of students. We see this often when students' applications and pre-program reflections use language around "helping" communities and "fixing" problems they face.

In order to step back and move away from perpetuating hierarchical power dynamics, we focus on creating experiences in which students are able to begin unpacking their own power and privilege and recognizing how both personal and institutional structures contribute to social issues, both on small-group and societal levels. Two of our break leaders this past year, who were simultaneously employed by the university's Multicultural Community Center, led a workshop which included an overview of basic terminology for folks who had never had these conversations and a component that asked our leaders to reflect on the intersections of their own identity categories and how those manifest in different settings. The facilitators of this workshop helped created a space of deeply insightful dialogue about the significance of power and privilege. Many of the break leaders found it very useful and went on to carry out their own training for their respective participants.

*Cultural Humility*

We also conduct cultural humility training for trip leaders and participants before they depart. The concept of cultural humility offers an alternative to cultural competence in the field of medicine. In this context, Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) describe how cultural humility is a process involving constant self-reflection and self-critique, checking power imbalances in the physician-patient relationship, and being humble as a vehicle to developing authentic partnerships" (118).

Our cultural humility workshop centers on the notion that upon entering different communities, we must be respectful and consciously practice humility because of the invisible cultural differences that exist and power dynamics that can manifest unintentionally. We recently consolidated this training onto an online presentation platform, allowing it to be used and improved upon each year so that our study and praxis can continue to grow and develop. The training is intended to push participants to begin asking the deeper questions about why they are engaged in service and to help them further develop their relationships with social justice. Recognizing our own beliefs and assumptions is one step towards working to unpack the many layers of power inequality and their roles in perpetuating social injustice.

*Disorientation Guide*

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[1] The Conference on Interamerican Student Projects (CIASP) sent Canadian university students to do service in rural Mexican communities (2006).

We explored another form of sharing our ideas this past year with our development of a "disorientation guide" to service learning. The guide includes short pieces written by break leaders and directors accompanied by infographics to provide participants and anyone else engaged in service-learning projects with ideas and insights about how to deepen and complicate their thinking about service. Article topics include "voluntourism," critical reflection, cultural humility, how to think about choosing service partners who are truly working in solidarity with community, and overviews about critical service-learning more broadly. Our program hopes to continue to build off the work and improve the guide so it includes more voices and insights. One goal we have in mind for next year is to create a video that helps to deconstruct service and provides a visual for how critical service learning can be put into practice.

In addition, we broadened our scope of raising awareness about our practices when several student break leaders and directors presented at the national IMPACT conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Their presentation discussed how service learning can work to move away from voluntourism towards a more critical service-learning model. Our students facilitated informative, critical dialogue with others engaged in leading and developing higher education service-learning curriculum to collectively discuss best practices and projects that help to promote a more social justice-oriented approach to service.

*Post-Trip Solidarity*

Lastly, in order to continue to strive towards our vision of "solidarity in action," we continuously try to strengthen our sustainability efforts so that participants do not see their service-learning trip as an isolated experience. Our goal is for these trips to serve as a platform for participants' continued commitment to working for social justice.

Working to redistribute power requires consistent effort, much more than just a weeklong trip. For this reason, each trip organizes a service project in the Bay Area to help draw connections between the issues of focus in their specific trip communities and in their home communities. This not only supports better connections and relationships for students to continue their work, but also serves to highlight that virtually none of the issues we face are isolated in one geographic area.

Working to redistribute power serves as one of the visions guiding us in this work. We aim to consciously think about how we can better our program and curriculum to truly live into the values and practices of critical service learning. Every year builds upon the strengths and progress of the previous years to innovate and implement better ways of putting theory into practice.

## Developing Authentic Relationships

*Growing up, I lived in an atypical household of a working mom and stay-at-home dad. My dad spends much of his time cooking, and he loves feeding our family of five plenty of dishes influenced by our Vietnamese heritage or his "experiments." To him, having a good cook in the house is like having a doctor; proper food translates to healthy living. I would always have the most delicious leftovers to bring to school for lunch, while I would walk by the cafeteria at the end of the lunch period to see that there were lines of students still waiting to buy their food. I*

*would ask, why would anyone want to wait in line that long for food, food that is decidedly gross, bland, and greasy?*

*Since those times, I have come to realize the questions I could have asked instead. My circle of friends brought their lunches from home just like me, and I cannot recall the name of anybody I knew who bought our school's lunches. Social inequity and intersections of resource acquisition were staring me blank in the face, but I had no idea.*

*I began learning what kinds of questions I could have asked myself after serving with the Alternative Breaks food justice trip. It is not just about having food and not having food, but to me, it is about access to resources for healthy lifestyles. Who should get those resources, and where do they come from? What do these resources cost families, and are there strings attached? As someone who comes from a place of privilege, such as my status as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, should I know the people on the "other side" when I care about these questions? Alternative Breaks has given me the space to question what position I have in society and what "community" is to me and to others. More importantly, it has taught me how to build relationships with community members in all directions.*

*When I serve with a community that is not my own, the importance of building authentic relationships with people is invaluable. My world becomes more colorful with the addition of more acquaintances, partners, allies, and friends. Collectively visioning a shared future for our communities is like building a kaleidoscope of our hopes and dreams. Each piece may be a little different and it looks like chaos from afar, but once I focus in, I see the intricate patterns that connect the pieces and the beauty it makes. I do not want to be disconnected from those around me, as I believe in our common goal of happy wellbeing and healthy lives.*

*After graduation, I am most interested in working towards a collective vision through environmental policy and law. As I pursue my goal of influencing the rules which govern our society, I will remember that it is humans that make up humanity, not just names, figures, and actions. Every line of governance affects groups of people, whether or not it is intentional. Alternative Breaks has taught me to be conscientious of the relationships that bind people together, and relationship-building is one major tool that I will carry on with me from my time at UC Berkeley. Life after graduation looks unpredictable and puzzling from my vantage point, but I am comforted by my knowledge that society is made up of networks of people and their authentic relationships with one another.*
*-Danielle Ngo*

Alternative Breaks at UC Berkeley strives to build what Mitchell (2008) calls "relationships based on connection," which includes appreciating, acknowledging, supporting, and learning from one another (58). These relationships can develop through a multitude of permutations between individuals. It may be between a pair of break leaders, a participant with a community partner, an alumnus with a community member, etc. These status identifiers in the Alternative Breaks realm are not meant to enforce any sort of power dynamic, but instead, to inform what experiences and insights a person might bring to the table. In building authentic relationships, we agree with Mitchell that it is not just about noticing the commonalities between one another. Our program works to bridge folks across differences in a meaningful way that translates to a coalition-based commitment to solidarity.

We recognize that the relationships we aim for require time and space to develop. The growth of our community partnerships can take several years to develop, but the effect is astounding. The growing understanding and trust between our trips and community partners

strengthens the work immensely, as each party involved can look back on positive memories that have defined their time spent together. Shared beliefs are reinforced and visions become clearer. During this time, the space to provide feedback and dialogue with each other has proven essential to strengthening our partnerships. Patiently allowing for such time and space to germinate relationships within Alternative Breaks also helps us recognize how to adapt to the changing needs and situations of the community.

We aim to continue growing the authentic relationships developed through our program, as this only continues to strengthen the work we do. In authentic relationships, individuals are open about their identities, assumptions, biases, and emotions. Individuals on either side can be honest about what they know and do not know, understand the perspectives that counter or build upon theirs, and challenge each other in critical moments that require every voice involved. Many students are involved with our program each year and go through the motions of our service-learning model. Most are evidently transformed by the experience, but some are not. Time and time again, it is those students who speak highly of the deep, authentic relationships they have built that continue to be involved, either through our program in leadership positions or through other methods of continuing their work in their trip's community or with a particular community partner.

*Dialogue Dates*

Throughout the academic year, each of our break leaders participates in short, informal one-on-one meetings with break leaders from other trips. Each pair of break leaders is tied to its trip's particular social justice issue, but we believe it is essential for our leaders to explore the intersections of justice and community. Much of our break leaders' time throughout the year is heavily structured, often in their trip pairs, to meet program goals and accomplish tasks. So dialogue dates also serve as an opportunity to meet others in a casual setting and experience the humanness that operates behind all of their impassioned work. These dialogue dates help strengthen their awareness outside of their individual trips, form meaningful relationships, and engage in critical dialogue about the broader ideals which guide our program.

*All-Community Meetings*

We hold three All-Community Meetings (ACMs) during our program's year. These events involve participants, leaders, faculty advisors, community partners, campus partners, and friends. At ACMs, we highlight the breadth and depth of our program's history, excite students about their commitment to serve, and celebrate our community's accomplishments. We hold the first ACM in November to introduce our vision and model of social justice to newly admitted participants. It is the first chance for all participants and break leaders to meet each other and welcome each other into the space.

Our second ACM is in January, the start of the spring semester, and marks the start of participants' weekly DeCal seminars. This ACM energizes the participants as they embark on the education component of our critical service-learning model.

At our final ACM held in April, the program and community reconvene to reflect upon their experiences, discuss intersections between those experiences, and celebrate what is hopefully just the beginning of a journey and lifelong commitment to social justice work. While participants spend most of the year meeting with just their trip peers and community partners, the

consistency of our ACMs helps further our goal of coalition and community building across difference.

*Community Dinners*

During the weeklong service trips, break leaders coordinate with a director to organize one evening for a community dinner. The guest list includes alumni who have previously been involved with Alternative Breaks or the Public Service Center, community partners, and community members; local residents are also enthusiastically invited to join. These community dinners highlight the people with whom we are working in solidarity and mutuality. It is a chance for participants to mingle, network, and bond with community and alumni. More recently, these dinners have also become hotspots of collaboration between alumni, many of whom work in professional sectors, and community partners, furthering our goal of connecting resources to people working to serve community needs. These dinners invite everyone to the table, allowing for dialogue, friendship, and meaningful collaboration.

*Fundraising as Organizing*

With the goal of keeping our trip costs and program expenses low, employing a strong fundraising model is critical. The entirety of our $50,000 annual budget is fundraised each year, thanks to our diversified and constantly improving model. A handful of campus grants and our highly-subsidized participant trip fees generate a sizeable portion of our revenue, but without program-wide fundraising, we could not manage this program each year.

In the past, participants and leaders have sent letters to our friends and family, requesting donations to support the program. This year, we successfully piloted a partnership with Piggybackr, a San Francisco-based crowdfunding start-up. Using Piggybackr has helped our program fundraise with manageable effort in a way that is fun, easy, and effective, in addition to spreading awareness about the work we are doing. We also maintain a relationship with an Oakland-based, women-led small business that makes cookie dough that we sell as another source of fundraising. In all parts of our fundraising model, we aim to build solid relationships with partners that share our ideals of economic empowerment and community building.

*Financial Aid*

Compared to similar service-learning programs and trips around the country, our trip fees are some of the most affordable and subsidized we have seen. But in addition to this, it is highly critical for us to offer financial aid to support those who would be unable to participate in our program otherwise. Our financial aid system operates independently of the University, and considers holistically the socio-economic and circumstantial situations of each individual applicant. This financial aid system allows students from all socio-economic backgrounds to partake in our program, which diversifies the perspectives in our trips, allows for the development of relationships that might not otherwise occur, and works towards actualizing our vision of equity.

**Conclusion**

*Today, I am urgently concerned with making sure that once my time with this program ends, I have concrete knowledge and understanding that will allow me to continue "living" the things I have learned. In the field of education specifically, this means figuring out how I will materialize my goal of teaching critical history and herstory within a rigid public education system that is based and evaluated upon a broad but incomprehensive set of bullet-point standards. It means finding ways to earn the trust of and be an ally to students from all backgrounds, always conscious of my whiteness, my middle-class upbringing, my education at one of the most prestigious universities in the world, and the privileges that come with each of those backgrounds. And all the while, as I try to be the very best I can be within the four walls of my classroom, how do I make sure I continue fighting for justice at all levels of educational and social policy, working to dismantle the systems that oppress my students, and ensuring that my students are empowered to do the same?*

*These are lofty goals, I realize, and perhaps "goal" is not even the right word because these objectives are not realistically attainable for one teacher, or even one school or district. And though I feel nervous because of the high stakes and importance of education, because I know how incredibly influential one single teacher can be in a student's life, I also feel excited and hopeful because I know I take my next steps well-equipped with tools, understanding, and passion that are so important to this work. And I know, largely due to my own journey of the last few years and my work with Alternative Breaks, that I will spend my career tirelessly striving as though these goals are attainable because that is what my interpretation of "living social justice" looks like.*
*-Sarah Ducker*


This companion piece to Mitchell's literature review is four students' attempt to encapsulate the journey of a program working to embody the ideals Mitchell discusses as the most crucial defining aspects of critical service-learning. This journey is occurring simultaneously on many different levels. Programmatically, we are journeying to improve the work we do, to make firmer our commitments to community partners, to better train our leaders and participants to engage with social justice orientations, work to redistribute power, and build authentic relationships. Individually, we are journeying to grow in the ways that we interact with this work, the ways that we exist within this program and outside of it. We are journeying to figure out how we can incorporate the invaluable lessons we have learned, lenses we have formed, and relationships we have built into living social justice-oriented lives beyond the scope of this program. In our personal narratives, we have tried to encapsulate the manifestations of these questions in each of our lives, as well as the processes we find ourselves engrossed within as we attempt to resolve them.

Ideally, these questions are on the minds of everyone who comes into contact with these experiences. How can we put into practice the things we have learned in such a structured, supportive environment? How can we stay involved and engaged with the community partners we have met, the social injustices we have begun to explore and address? How can we apply the principles and ideals we've come to value when we are no longer university students? As doctors, teachers, advertisers, farmers, researchers?

Although most participants are only part of this program for one semester, we aim to build a space for students to contemplate the urgency and importance of their own roles in relation to social justice work. At our final All-Community Meeting at the conclusion of each Alternative Breaks year, we encourage participants and leaders to see this experience as a

starting point – a diving board, if you will – into a pool of passionate, committed, and long-term dedication to working for social justice. We ask them to continue asking difficult questions, pushing themselves out of their comfort zones, reaching out to build relationships across and inclusive of difference. We ask them to notice the structures and systems that underlie the world around them, wherever they go and whatever they do when they are no longer students of the University. To question those systems, to dialogue with the people affected by them, and to never stop working to make them more just. We ask them to stay involved with our program, either directly or through continuing to work with the community partners who have given them so much. Moreover, students on each trip brainstorm ways to stay involved and in touch with their community partners via email, events, internships, or future service collaborations. This is one way we strive to build accountability and continuity into our program and to support one another in living out these ideals even after leaving the program.

There is certainly discomfort in being faced with so many questions to which we cannot articulate answers. But perhaps, this is one way of measuring the success of the critical service-learning model. Even if we can empower students with the tools and supportive space to engage critically, to develop what a social change orientation means for them, to begin to understand structures of power and how they might be dismantled to successively dismantle systems of oppression, and to develop and nurture authentic relationships based in similar values and passions, we cannot expect them to finish the semester with everything figured out. Moreover, if students leave our program and UC Berkeley with these kinds of questions, what choice do they have but to continue to engage, to continue to search for answers to their questions? If our application of this model works, participants will continue through their lives embodying the principles that make up the critical service-learning framework and it will far outlive their semester-long classrooms and week-long service trips.

~

for building relationships with us and allowing us to work side by side with you, learn from you, and grow with you.

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