

Book Review

Sumka, S., Porter, M. C., & Piacitelli, J. (2015). *Working side by side: Creating alternative breaks as catalysts for global learning, student leadership, and social change*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

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Alternative Breaks on college campuses have moved from a “feel good” week of service to a movement for social change. *Working Side by Side* is a comprehensive look at these short-term and immersive service experiences led by students during weekends or academic breaks. The authors provide an effective introduction to those unfamiliar with co-curricular service experiences, explaining the history, structure, and critical components of Alternative Breaks. In addition to its practicality as a “how-to” manual, *Working Side by Side* offers a more theoretical argument for understanding Alternative Breaks as a social justice movement in which students develop as active citizens and communities are made stronger through their efforts together.

To this reviewer’s knowledge, this is the only book of its kind and is likely the closest there is to a textbook on Alternative Breaks. Those familiar with Break Away, the national nonprofit organization that promotes the development of quality Alternative Break programs, will find themselves on familiar ground with *Working Side by Side*. Two of the authors, Melody Porter and Shoshanna Sumka, direct Alternative Break programs on campuses that are members of Break Away, and the third author, Jill Piacitelli, is the organization’s former Executive Director.

For those newer to the world of Alternative Break experiences, this book lays the groundwork for applying best practices of service-learning to a largely co-curricular experience. Reflection, understood primarily by Break Away’s definition as “any process in which participants mentally and emotionally synthesize direct service and the learning components (education, orientation and training)” (p. 153), is widely recognized as a critical component to service-learning. Reflection is also one of the eight key components of successful Alternative Break programs. It is joined by the following tenets:

- Diversity and social justice - addressing power, privilege, and systems of oppression
- Education - the understanding of social issues

Orientation - to organization, location, and context

- Training - building skills necessary for the service
- Strong direct service - working with communities Alcohol and drug free - practicing full engagement
- Reorientation - active citizens reorganizing locally

Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli approach Alternative Breaks from a justice centered perspective that values reciprocal work done in partnership. They offer potential positive impacts of Alternative Breaks on communities such as capacity building, increasing community cohesion, building alliances through community organizing, creating positive economic impact through the return of students each year, developing new or additional resources, amplifying community voice, increasing a donor base, and improving morale through solidarity. The authors do acknowledge the potential negative impacts of Alternative Break programs with a discussion of an unhealthy dependence that might be created between a partner or partners and an Alternative Break program, volunteers who are untrained or inexperienced, the displacement of local labor, and the possible draining of resources from community organizations. This acknowledgement serves as the introduction to the argument for well-planned and effective community partnerships.

The authors list qualities of effective partnerships to mitigate the potential negative impacts inherent in immersion programs. They cite the need for collaborations that are community driven, following a lifecycle so as not to rely only on short-term volunteers. They further suggest that programs be carefully developed and piloted, strengthened over time, and evaluated against shared goals to determine if or when a partnership may need to change or end. Part two of the book provides a valuable outline of what this process looks like specifically before, during and after an Alternative Break trip.

Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli acknowledge the increased complexity of international Alternative Breaks and suggest a positive outcome will depend on the trip's underlying motivation(s), preparation, planning methods, communication and other choices that the trip planners and the host community make together. *Working Side by Side* maps out a path to responsible experiences where participants are offered intentional orientation, education, and training. The authors prompt consideration of approach and attitude, and how to develop cultural humility in Alternative Breakers. These discussions are highlighted by specific examples, such as how giving out candy or gifts can create a relationship of inequality or introducing a camera can create a dynamic of objectification.

Many Alternative Break programs, whether they are housed in Student or Academic Affairs, will be responsible for demonstrating student learning outcomes or student impacts. *Working Side by Side* powerfully addresses assessment. The Active Citizen Continuum, borrowed from Break Away, is a useful model for the developmental process in which student stages of citizen identity development are identified. Sumka, Porter, and Piacitelli identify student leadership as essential to reaching the ideal outcome of active citizenship and posit that Alternative Break programs are an overt way to address university mission statements and goals that include the development of citizenship values and skills.

Part three of the book directly addresses student leadership, learning, and transformation. The authors acknowledge that institutions will differ in their specific leadership development practices but that what needs to be

valued in common is providing opportunities for students to have real decision-making power. This can happen, they say, when students are members of executive boards, take on the roles of site leaders, or act as coordinators. Chapter 18 specifically addresses assessing student learning and walks through the process of creating learning outcomes that can be measured and analyzed, with tools that have been tried and tested.

Readers looking for practical guidance on developing or strengthening Alternative Breaks programs are not left out amidst the big picture discussions. Part four of this "text" delivers advice on strategic planning for any level of a program's development, including recruiting student trip leaders and participants, and covers topics such as budgeting, fundraising, and risk management.

In sum, the book is effective and accessible to students, staff, and faculty who are looking to start or strengthen an existing program or learn about the potential transformative power of Alternative Breaks. Even beyond those directly in this field, anyone working with students who are engaging in the community will find *Working Side by Side* an effective resource for program development. As a community engagement practitioner who works directly with an Alternative Break program, reading this book was a reflective, affirming, and energizing experience. Although not a quick or particularly light read, the clear and authentic tone peppered with models, graphs, examples, and personal stories from the authors kept me engaged throughout and excited for putting new ideas into practice.