

BUILDING HOUSES, ACTIVE CITIZENS, AND DISASTER RESILIENCE: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF ALTERNATIVE BREAK EXPERIENCES

RONI J. FRASER, University of Delaware
rfraser@udel.edu

RONALD L. SCHUMANN III, University of Delaware
Ronald.Schumann@unt.edu

MARY M. NELAN, University of Delaware
Mary.Nelan@unt.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of a one-week disaster recovery alternative break experience (ABE) in New Orleans, Louisiana, in January 2018. ABEs are non-credit elective programs for undergraduate students that blend active citizen pedagogies with field-based learning in compelling, cost-effective ways. The case study describes the ABE program, including its underlying pedagogies, schedule, learning objectives, and activities, distinguishing it from traditional community service projects and study abroad programs. The authors describe the unique situation of the ABE program at the University of North Texas and identify aspects that may be transferable to field-based student engagements in emergency management at other universities. ABE programs enrich emergency management curricula and cost-effective ways for students to explore disaster-focused social justice issues and become lifelong active citizens.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines a one-week alternative break experience (ABE) case study focused on disaster recovery. ABEs are non-credit elective programs for undergraduate students that blend active citizen pedagogies with field-based learning in compelling, cost-effective ways. The case study distinguishes ABEs from traditional community service projects, service-learning courses, and study-abroad trips. The authors comprise a former student and two faculty members from the Department of Emergency Management and Disaster Science (EMDS) at the University of North Texas (UNT), who co-led the disaster recovery ABE to New Orleans, Louisiana, in January 2018.

The article first profiles the unique situation of the ABE program within the university. Next, the article provides a course description that details the learning objectives, schedule, and underlying pedagogies that informed the 2018 New Orleans winter ABE. It then discusses ABE engagement methods and outcomes. In considering plans for future offerings, the authors identify challenges limiting this particular ABE's duplication. Finally, the conclusion highlights aspects of the program that may be transferable to other field-based student engagements in emergency management.

UNIVERSITY AND PROGRAM BACKGROUND

UNT is a public, four-year institution with over 40,000 students. Classified as a Carnegie Tier-One research university and designated a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), UNT houses EMDS. The department offers the nation's first bachelor's degree program in Emergency Administration and Planning (EADP) and a graduate program in EMDS. The department includes eight full-time faculty, approximately 140 undergraduate EADP majors (who must complete a professional internship), and 30 graduate EMDS majors. The department encourages but does not require further experiential service learning.

The ABE is one of several student-led programs sponsored by UNT's Center for Leadership and Service (CLS). The ABE program aims to raise lifelong awareness of social justice issues through community-based education and grassroots engagement. ABEs are typically offered in person for one week or three-day weekends. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CLS added options for hybrid and virtual experiences across the Southern and Central United States.

CLS facilitates a variety of ABEs that profile different social justice issues. CLS is crucial in training student leaders and faculty advisors, providing logistical support, and establishing ties with a community-based partner. In New Orleans, this partner was SBP¹, a national disaster response, recovery, and non-profit resilience organization (SBPUSA, 2022). Although ABE student leaders and advisors may not necessarily possess academic backgrounds connected to the focal issue, the 2018 New Orleans winter ABE was unique in its integration of a student leader and professors with local knowledge and expertise on disaster recovery.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Learning Objectives and Schedule

The 2018 New Orleans winter ABE spanned eight days (two travel days, two education days, and four direct service days), plus one mandatory pre-trip orientation and a post-trip reflection session. Eleven student participants came from various majors (e.g., emergency management, geography, engineering, public health, and pre-med studies). All participants were interested in disaster housing recovery. The ABE was designed with three broad learning objectives:

1. To foster an appreciation for New Orleans' sociocultural background beyond superficial understandings based on tourism or mass media coverage of Hurricane Katrina.
2. To illustrate the multifaceted concepts of disaster recovery and resilience through engagement with people and places in the New Orleans region.
3. To transform students from well-intentioned disaster volunteers into well-informed, conscientious, and active citizens capable of furthering community resilience.

The pre-departure session, led by two student leaders and one faculty advisor, supported all three objectives. The two-hour session allowed students to meet, ask travel-related questions, become acquainted with the focal issue, and learn the region's background. The first full day, a "field

¹ SBP is a nonprofit, disaster relief organization. SBP was formerly known as the St. Bernard Project.

orientation day,” served as an education day and advanced objectives one and two. The purpose was to deepen understanding of regional culture. The participants explored the French Quarter and visited the Louisiana State Museum, which contains exhibits on Mardi Gras and the city’s Hurricane Katrina experiences.

The next four days were service days. The primary focus was hands-on construction work. Direct service provided by students aided community-wide efforts to restore housing and enable a previously displaced family to return home. On day one, participants received a brief orientation from SBP on its housing recovery mission before relocating to a home rebuild site in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans. Students and faculty spent eight-hour days working at the site, hanging drywall and plaster, supervised by two SBP site leaders who were long-term AmeriCorps volunteers. Work ended early in the afternoon, leaving time for a cultural site visit and group reflection exercises. Cultural visits reinforced objective one, and service work and reflection activities advanced learning objective three.

The final day featured a regional tour exploring the root causes and complexities of disaster recovery and resilience, primarily focusing on objective two. One of the faculty advisors, an area native, planned site visits to illustrate infrastructural, sociocultural, and ecological resilience. Tour stops included flood protection structures, neighborhoods affected by industrial pollution, indigenous shell middens, and healthy and unhealthy wetland sites. Site selection emphasized successes and cautionary lessons for coping with various hazards. Several weeks after returning home, the CLS office hosted a reflection event for all winter ABE participants to share their stories and reflections, thus reinforcing objective three.

Social Justice Pedagogy

The 2018 New Orleans winter ABE was informed by pedagogies intended to grow active citizens instead of unengaged *voluntourists*. Voluntourists are voluntourism participants, a growing trend of people who merge volunteer work with tourism. The ABE incorporated the Quality Community Service Triangle (Lafayette Landis Center, 2015) and the Active Citizen Continuum (Breakaway, 2014) as pedagogical foundations. The Quality Community Service Triangle emphasizes direct service, reflection, and education as co-constitutive for impactful service experiences; the lack of any ingredient creates a superficial, stigmatizing, or potentially exploitative field experience. The Active Citizen Continuum comprises four stages and focuses on transforming unconcerned members of society into conscientious and, later, active citizens who question the roots of social inequity and become long-term changemakers.

Collectively, these foundational frameworks distinguish the ABE program from a traditional community service project. Traditional community service engages students only for a brief time (often a few hours on a single day). Students may be well-intentioned but need to be more educated and equipped to confront social issues the service seeks to address. Alternatively, the ABE prepares students for sustained, well-informed community involvement long after the program concludes. While the Quality Community Service Triangle informs the development of ABE learning objectives, as described previously, the Active Citizen Continuum shapes engagements before, during, and after the ABE. The enrichment of students’ multi-day direct

service work with educational and reflective opportunities before, during, and after the ABE distinguishes this program from a traditional community service project.

COURSE ENGAGEMENT

Since the ABE is a non-credit elective program rather than a credit-based, service-learning course, the authors use engagement measures instead of assessment to describe formal reflection activities before, during, and after travel. Formative engagements included the pre-trip meeting and daily reflection activities, while the reflections after education day and upon return comprised summative engagements.

The pre-trip meeting allowed students to express their interests in disaster recovery and their goals and expectations for the ABE. The meeting served as a baseline for measuring progress along the Active Citizen Continuum. Icebreakers, team building, orientation, and initial social issue education initiated the transformation process (Breakaway, 2014). While on break, daily reflection furthered students' transformations. The reflections included independent journal prompts, small group think-pair-share sessions, and group discussions. As the week progressed, reflective activities encouraged students to formulate action plans for disaster resilience-building activities they might participate in upon returning home (e.g., supporting local justice-focused non-profits and interning in emergency management).

The summative reflections near the end of the ABE were the most powerful. For example, following four days of service in a primarily Black neighborhood and an education day where racial inequity in disasters was a recurrent theme, many students reflected for the first time on the efficacy of their service: rather than simply repairing a house in a poor, minority neighborhood, they now viewed their work as actively restoring a vibrant, living community. Visiting the Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum² prompted students to interact with Black narratives of place and Black children living in the neighborhood. These interactions facilitated discussion of how minority communities may be tokenized in popular representations of disaster and forced students to confront racial stereotypes and injustices.

The post-trip reflection was conducted with other 2018 winter ABE groups that traveled elsewhere and focused on other issues, thus permitting students to synthesize their experiences collectively. During this session, students described how the ABE challenged their comfort levels and established an affinity for the community organization's (SBP) mission of supporting post-disaster community resilience. Other students discussed how this first-person experience with disaster recovery motivated them to pursue graduate education and careers in disaster management. As of the writing of this article, approximately half of the 2018 New Orleans winter ABE participants have undertaken disaster-related careers, including positions with AmeriCorps, the Texas Division of Emergency Management, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Summative reflections and subsequent life choices encapsulating students'

² The Lower Ninth Ward Living Museum is a grassroots neighborhood history museum and community center. The museum offers self-guided tours, provides after-school care, and organizes community events. When we visited, children were engaged in a Mardi Gras-themed art project.

post-break transformations demonstrate the intended values of active citizenship (Breakaway, 2014).

Plans

Although students and faculty participants universally praised the effectiveness of the 2018 disaster recovery ABE and hoped to repeat the experience, several aspects make it difficult to replicate. These include challenges with student leadership, engaging faculty, and sustained funding from the university.

First, student leadership is crucial to future offerings since ABEs are student-driven. Student experience leaders actively select participants, recruit advisors, conduct pre-departure meetings, coordinate with community partners, plan the daily schedule, and lead reflections. Due to the unpaid nature of this position, the considerable time commitment, and the planning skills required, some undergraduate students may be deterred from leading an ABE, particularly those with outside employment.

Second, qualified faculty and staff advisors must actively support the ABE. Faculty and staff serve as advisors and vehicle drivers and ensure the safety and security of all participants. The most effective advisors are subject matter experts on the ABE's primary issues.

For example, the first author participated in three UNT ABEs focused on disaster recovery, two with staff advisors from unrelated offices and the third with EMDS faculty who researched long-term recovery (second author) and disaster volunteerism (third author). EMDS faculty facilitated more productive discussions on disaster resilience and provided more nuanced cultural education. The minimal training required for advisors and the flexibility of faculty schedules relative to staff should incentivize faculty involvement. However, the travel timeframe and workload distribution for tenure-track professors (typically 10% for service versus 50% for research) disincentivize participation, particularly among junior faculty.

Finally, program funding can vary each year. The cost ranges from \$2,000 to \$7,000 per experience, with trip enrollments between 12 and 18 and one student leader per six students. At UNT, ABEs are funded primarily through student fees, supplemented by student program fees paid by each participant (\$300 at the time of publication). By expanding virtual and hyper-local programs with lower student program fees, \$30 and \$150, respectively, CLS is working to ensure sustainable funding practices and sponsorships that reduce direct student costs and increase participation.

Despite these hurdles, prospects for future disaster related ABEs are promising. The EMDS department's new 1000-level discovery course for non-majors is an ideal venue for recruiting prospective ABE student leaders and participants near the beginning of their studies. In turn, ABEs themselves, led by EADP students, may attract new majors. EMDS faculty are enthusiastic about assisting students in planning ABE trips to disaster-impacted regions where they have ongoing field research or embedded knowledge. Links to community-based organizations made by EMDS faculty and CLS staff have the potential to produce fruitful service-learning collaborations on issues beyond disaster recovery (e.g., risk reduction, climate

adaptation, and emergency preparedness). Moreover, considering UNT's status as an HSI, EMDS faculty and CLS staff recognize the potential for domestic, field-based programs like ABE to broaden access to experiential service-learning for low-income and minority students who may be unable to participate in lengthier or costlier study abroad programs.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented a case study of an alternative break experience focused on disaster recovery. Several aspects of this experiential learning approach may be transferable to other academic departments. These include enhancing student learning through faculty-embedded knowledge and relationships in the host community; relying upon student leadership to design and implement the ABE; utilizing the Active Citizen Continuum and Quality Community Service Triangle as pedagogical approaches to ensure deep and sustained community engagement; and leveraging ABEs and discovery courses, in conjunction, to support recruitment and retention of majors. In sum, ABE programs are valuable assets to emergency management departments. They should be considered in future offerings as cost-effective ways for students to explore disaster-focused social justice issues and become lifelong active citizens.

REFERENCES

Breakaway. (2014). *The active citizen continuum*. <http://alternativebreaks.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Active-Citizen-Continuum-2014.pdf>.

Lafayette Landis Center. (2015). *Triangle of quality community service*. <https://landiscenter.lafayette.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/69/2015/01/TriangleOfQualityService.pdf>.

SBPUSA. (2022). *About us*. <https://sbpusa.org/about-us>