



2017

The Effects of Participation in Alternative Break: An Alumni Sample Study

Zac D. Johnson

Matthew M. Martin

This article was originally published at:

<https://journals.sfu.ca/iarslce/index.php/journal/article/view/271/189>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Z. D., & Martin, M. M. (2017). The effects of participation in alternative break: An alumni sample study. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 5(1), 145-159.

The Effects of Participation in Alternative Break: An Alumni Sample Study

Zac D. Johnson

California State University, Fullerton

Matthew M. Martin

West Virginia University

Alternative break experiences occur when college or university students choose freely to eschew typical break activities in order to engage in service with a group of peers under the guidance of peer-leaders in a community removed from their own. While researchers have identified some immediate benefits of participation in alternative break experience, less is known about their long-term impacts. This article examines the results of a study in which 147 college graduates were asked to reflect on their alternative break experiences. Respondents reported that these experiences had long-term (i.e., post-graduate) effects such as fostering lasting relationships and changing life perspectives.

Keywords: *service-learning, alumni, connections, perspective*

Alternative breaks represent a unique area of scholarship that is germane to service-learning scholars and practitioners within higher education. To date, alternative break scholarship has produced somewhat limited knowledge claims asserting, for instance, that students experience long-term change because of participation in alternative breaks (e.g., Barclay, 2010) and that they develop long-lasting and meaningful relationships as a result of these experiences (McElhaney, 1998). However, most of the studies supporting these claims have employed samples consisting of current or recent alternative break. Existing research has not utilized alumni samples to validate findings drawn from the experience of current or recent participants, though, notably, such samples have been used in other contexts to successfully assess educational experiences (Rice, Steward, & Hujber, 2000). Although researchers have suggested that alternative break participation can result in long-term change and relationships, little is known as to whether these changes and relationships persist after graduation. Therefore, the current study attempted to derive a more accurate understanding of the long-term cognitive and relational effects of alternative break participation, ultimately arriving at suggestions for practitioners who support and advise these programs.

Alternative Breaks

Alternative break experiences are a relatively new tradition in campus life (Bowen, 2011; Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Campus Compact, 2011; Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, & Sumka, 2013) and can be defined as experiences that occur when students choose freely (in an extra- not co-curricular sense) to eschew typical break activities (e.g., vacation) in order to engage in service with a group of peers under the guidance of peer leaders in a community removed from their own (i.e., immersion). Other scholars

have conceived of alternative breaks in similar ways (Piacitelli et al., 2013); however, many of these conceptualizations omit one of the descriptors identified earlier. For example, Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, and Sumka (2013) suggested that alternative breaks occur in an extracurricular programmatic space, but this is not the case for all institutions (i.e., participation does not require enrollment within a for-credit course) (Break Away, 2017). Others have failed to note that most alternative break experiences are student-led (e.g., Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, & Skendall, 2012). Research has demonstrated distinct differences in the process and outcomes related to extra- and co-curricular experiences (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004), and has shown that students interact with and are impacted by teachers and peers in different ways (Ellis, 2000; Johnson & LaBelle, 2015). These are important distinctions to make. Overall, such experiences afford students the opportunity to reap a multitude of developmental and experiential benefits (Barclay, 2010; McElhaney, 1998; Noll, 2012). Further, these benefits manifest themselves in both relational and cognitive ways (Bohon, 2007; Hui, 2009).

On the broadest level, it is easy to maintain that students develop personally as a result of participation in alternative break experiences. Hui (2009) highlighted the immersive nature of alternative break as crucial to allowing students to grow personally in ways that typical service-learning and volunteerism do not. Indeed, alternative break participants have reported developing new perceptions of service recipients (Bowen, 2011; Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005), including increased levels of compassion and empathy (Plante, Lackey, & Hwang, 2009). Alternative breaks can also affect student perceptions of social justice, civic engagement, cultural sensitivity, and citizenship (Bowen, 2011; Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Garbuio, 1999). Alternative break participants gain a more thorough understanding of themselves, others, and community through their experiences (Hui, 2009; Jones et al., 2012; Rhoades & Neurer, 1998), which also lead to gains across Chickering's (1969) seven developmental vectors, including increasing competence, developing mature relationships, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, fostering integrity, identifying purpose, establishing identity, and managing emotions (Barclay, 2010). More recently, scholars have suggested that alternative break participation leads to the fulfillment of professional goals (Squillace, 2014) and to career development (Niehaus & Inkelas, 2015). In addition to cognitive gains, such as understanding other perspectives, changing perceptions regarding issues, and revising or strengthening existing beliefs and values, participants have also experienced affective gains such as increasing self-awareness and building mature relationships (Barclay, 2010; McElhaney, 1998).

While there is a wealth of positive impacts associated with alternative break participation, there are potentially problematic elements and outcomes as well. Indeed, the developmental gains achieved through service-learning and short-term engagement are not automatic; students may not arrive at behaviors like perspective taking without the intentional effort by and specific attention from leaders and professionals (e.g., Jones, LePeau, & Robbins, 2013). Students engaged in community-based service-learning similar to alternative breaks occasionally reflect in ways that reveal they have reached "unwarranted, often racist conclusions based on selective perceptions" (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994). Further, community-based service-learning inherently carries with it potential problems of privilege performance in front of service recipients, as Heldman (2011) described working in a post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans alongside students who were "sunbathing on the concrete slabs of homes that had been washed away in the storm" (p. 36), among other problematic behaviors. Scholars who describe these potential issues within community-based service-learning (e.g., alternative breaks) often note that with purposeful effort by professionals and leaders, these moments can become teachable, and positive outcomes may still be achievable (Heldma, 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994). Overall, immersive service-learning—such as alternative breaks—is not without its pitfalls, but through targeted efforts, professionals can help students to create positive and meaningful experiences.

While a significant body of research has established the benefits associated with alternative breaks (e.g., McElhaney, 1998) and their potential problems (e.g., Heldman, 2011), there is still much to explore in relation to these programs. Specifically, what remains unclear is whether or not alternative break experiences lead to long-term (i.e., post-graduation) impacts, since the extant literature is rooted in studies involving recent or current participants. We were also interested in the alumni perspective on

short-term effects, to determine how they compared to the experiences described in the current literature, as well as perceived long-term outcomes. Thus, the following research question (RQ) and hypothesis (H) were posed:

- RQ1: How do alumni perceive that they were impacted by alternative breaks in the short-term and long-term?
- H1: Alternative breaks have a lasting impact on participants.

Reports of connections formed among students on alternative breaks are common (e.g., Bohon, 2007; DuPre, 2010; Hui, 2009; Jones et al., 2012). Barclay (2010) noted that students participating in alternative breaks reported gains in the development of mature interpersonal relationships. Non-curriculum-based experiences have been linked to more gains in social outcomes (e.g., connections) than curriculum-based experiences (McElhaney, 1998). Bohon (2007) and DuPre (2010) each reported anecdotally that they witnessed students form lasting connections that endured after they returned to campus. Others have suggested that such enduring connections are crucial to helping students reintegrate into their everyday lives after their immersion experience (Jones et al., 2012). Additionally, connections among peers have also been held up as a significant factor in student success and matriculation (Tinto, 1993). Although scholars maintain that lasting relationships are formed as a result of alternative breaks, they have not described the kinds of relationships that are established. It has been well documented that students develop a variety of relationships during college (e.g., Antonio, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pistole & Vocaturo, 1999); however, students likely develop different types of relationships through participation in alternative break. Thus, we posed the follow research question:

- RQ2: What types of relationships are created through participation in alternative breaks?

Finally, given that previous participants have reported being significantly affected by their alternative break experiences (Barclay, 2010; Bowen, 2011; Garbuio, 1999; Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005; Jones et al., 2012; McElhaney, 1998; Plante et al., 2009), we were interested in examining what makes these experiences meaningful. Therefore, we advanced the following research question:

- RQ3: What are the most meaningful aspects of alternative breaks?

Methods

Sample

Participants for this study were recruited online from a sample based on the researchers' own network and the networks of professional contacts who work directly with alternative break programs. This study utilized snowball sampling techniques by encouraging participants to share the survey link with others who fit the selection criteria (i.e., alumni, former participants in alternative break programs). Participation was anonymous and voluntary.

Study participants included 147 college graduates who had participated in alternative break while in college. The following demographic data are based on responses from those who chose to volunteer demographic information.¹ The sample comprised 25% men and 75% women. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 38 ($M = 26.92$; $SD = 3.98$). Graduation years ranged from 1996 to 2013. The average year of graduation was 2008 ($SD = 3.88$), meaning that at the time of reporting, the average participant had been out of college for approximately five years. The majority of the sample identified as White (91%); other participants identified as Black/African-American (5%), Asian (3%), and "Other" (1%).

Participants reported holding a variety of occupations, including teacher, realtor, lawyer, educator (e.g., higher education administrator), and clinical pharmacist, among others. Regarding graduation, 71% of participants reported graduating in four year or less, 25% reported graduating in five years, while 4% reported graduating in six years or more. Ninety-six percent of participants reported graduating from the same institution where they participated in alternative break, while 4% reported graduating from a different institution. Participants reported holding a variety of degrees (BA or BS =

¹ Many of the 147 participants did not report demographics. The number of non-reports ranged from 61-68, depending on the demographic question the participants did not answer.

50%; MA or MS = 42%; MBA = 1%; EdD or PhD = 3%; JD = 3%; MD, DO, or another advanced medical degree = 1%).

Based on Carnegie Foundation classifications for higher education institutions, several questions (e.g., enrollment size, type of degree granted, public or private status) addressed the type of college or university individuals attended when they participated in their alternative break experience. Participants reported on break trips that occurred at a variety of institutions. Ninety-seven percent of participants reported on an alternative break experience that took place at a four-year institution, while the remaining 3% reported on an experience based at an institution described as "Other." Eighty-five percent of respondents participated in their alternative breaks at public institutions, 15% at private institutions. Enrollment size also varied (< 5000 students = 15%; 6,000-15,000 students = 8%; 16,000+ students = 76%, unsure = 1%).

Seventy-nine percent of participants reported on alternative break trips that were primarily domestic (e.g., within the United States), while 21% percent of participants reported on international trips. Participants reported on fall breaks (24%), winter breaks (8%), spring breaks (64%), and summer breaks (4%).²

Measures

Research question one was assessed through two open-ended questions: "How do you feel you were impacted by your alternative break experiences in the short-term?" and "How do you feel you were impacted by your alternative break experience in the long-term?"

The lasting impact of alternative break was measured using eight items created for this study. These items assessed whether or not alumni felt as though their participation in alternative break had a lasting impact on them. For example, one item read, "Participating in alternative break had a lasting impact on me." Participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (5)." In this study, a Cronbach's alpha of .84 was obtained ($M = 33.96$; $SD = 4.40$), demonstrating high internal consistency.

Participants were asked about the types of relationships developed during their alternative break experiences. They were given the prompt, "Currently, I consider one of the other participants from my alternative break to be..." and then were asked to identify any or all of the following that were appropriate: "a best friend," "a close/good friend," "a friend," "a romantic partner or spouse," "a coworker," "a colleague," and "an acquaintance." Participants were also provided space in which to report on other relationship types. For purposes of clarification, participants were provided the following additional instruction: "For example, if you met your spouse/partner on an alternative break trip you would only mark 'romantic partner or spouse' for that relationship, even if though you might consider them to be a best friend as well." Considering that individuals may report different perceptions of what distinguishes a friend and a best friend (Burlison & Samter, 1996; Ledbetter, Griffin, & Sparks, 2007), participants were not provided any definition of these categories.

Research question two was assessed through one open-ended question: "What was the most meaningful aspect of alternative break?"

Data Collection and Analysis

After institutional review board approval was obtained, data were collected via online surveys posted on the website SurveyMonkey, and a convenience-snowball sample was utilized. Completed survey data were downloaded and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. Using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), themes emerged from the data. Responses were first open coded and then axial coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The identification of themes was guided by the framework set forth by Owen (1984), who claimed that themes should be recurrent, repetitious, and forceful. Owen

² Data were not collected regarding the types of service participants completed during their alternative breaks. However, a careful examination of the qualitative data indicates that participants described experiences related to healthcare, construction (i.e., Habitat for Humanity), HIV/AIDS work, and drug-abuse-related service.

posited that themes emerge when key words and phrases are repeated, when meaning recurs at different points within the data, and through participant emphasis or forcefulness. Forcefulness in online data collection can be observed through punctuation, capitalization, or boldface type. Data were collected until saturation was reached—that is, when no new themes emerged; this was determined by the constant-comparative method.

Results

Research question one sought to determine how alternative break impacted participants in both the short and long terms. Participants were asked to answer questions pertaining specifically to short-term and long-term effects. While some themes emerged as both short- and long-term impacts, others were unique to the immediate or eventual effects. Short-term effects of alternative break participation included: (a) connections, (b) campus involvement, (c) commitment to service, (d) perspective, (e) positive intrinsic rewards, and (f) career/vocational direction. A visual representation of the long-term effects can be found in Figure 1. Long-term effects of alternative break participation included: (a) connections, (b) perspective, (c) positive intrinsic rewards, (d) career/vocational direction, (e) service drive, (f) extrinsic rewards, and (g) memories. A visual representation of the long-term effects can be found in Figure 2. The following sections explicate these themes.

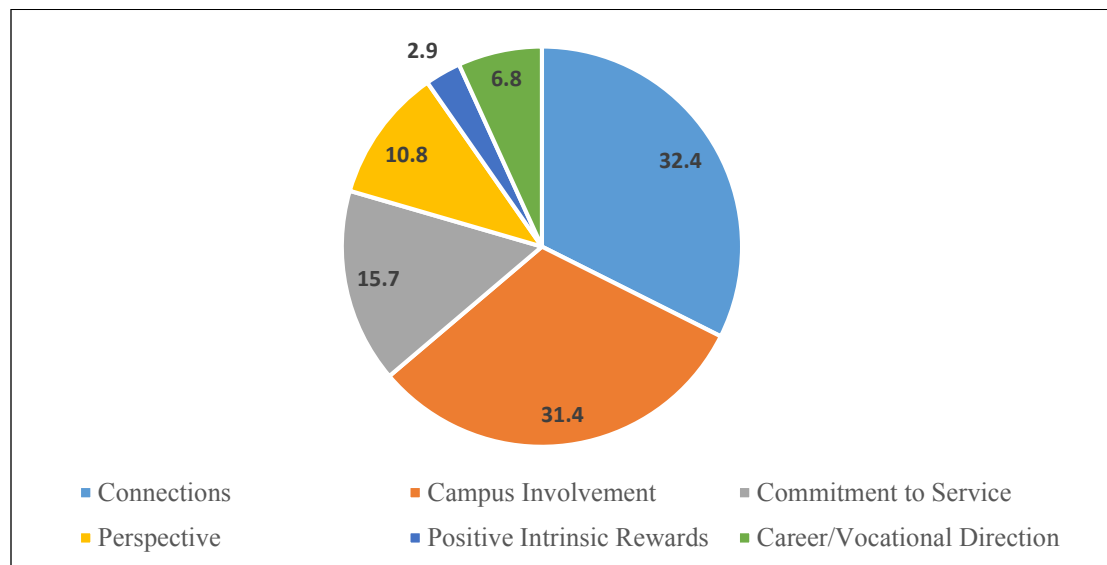


Figure 1. Short-term effects of alternative break participation. Note: Values represent percentage of total data regarding short-term effects.

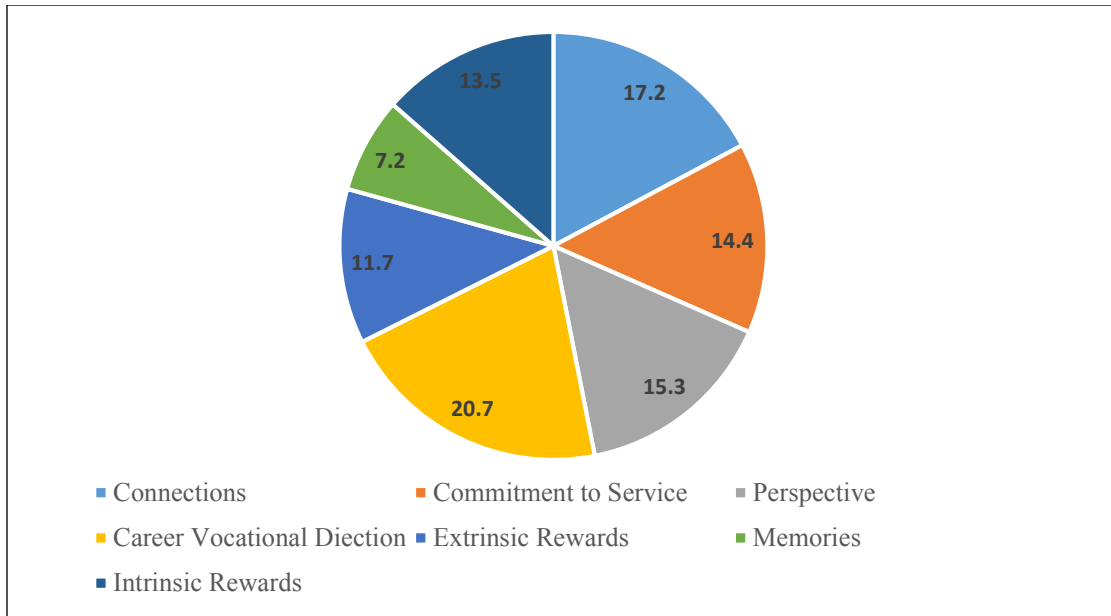


Figure 2. Long-term effects of alternative break participation. Note: Values represent percentage of total data regarding long-term effects.

Short-Term Effects

The first theme that appeared in the data regarding short-term effects was that of building and forging connections with other participants. Many participants claimed succinctly that participation in alternative breaks offered the short-term benefit of “increased social connections on campus,” or that they “met many acquaintances” as a result of participation. Others acknowledged that these connections led to relationships of greater quality than simple acquaintances; often these participants described creating “friendships,” making “friends,” or developing stronger or larger “networks.” One participant claimed that, in the short-term, alternative breaks provided “a new group of friends and people” they could “hang with and speak to on campus.” Notably, these connections were not only forged among peers, as noted in the following response; “It also gave me new contacts and faculty mentors in an office I had never been a part of.”

Separate from connections was the theme of campus involvement, which is best identified with participants’ recognition of their own desire and motivation to become more involved in campus and collegiate activities specifically. “It [Alternative break] made me interested in seeking out other leadership opportunities on campus,” declared one participant. Others noted that alternative break participation afforded them an outlet through which they could participate in other service-related activities; notably, these statements specifically referenced service or volunteering as a campus- or college-sponsored activity. Many other participants stated that alternative break participation strengthened their overall resolve to engage in service.

Commitment to service was a third theme that emerged. These participants used words and phrases that alluded to service outside of their collegiate experience, often referencing their home or local community. One participant said that alternative break made them want “to do more community service” locally. Other participants echoed this sentiment, indicating that participation in alternative break made them want to get involved in community service in their city and campus community after the trip had concluded. Finally, alternative break participation played an important role in providing many participants with an increased “service orientation” or commitment to service they had not held previously.

Many participants communicated that the experience of alternative break provided them with an increased sense of perspective. This theme was identified through participants’ references to an increased

sense of awareness, acceptance of others, or appreciation for their own privilege. Further, the theme of perspective was evident in participants' acknowledgement that alternative break had led them to grow personally or to experience a realization. Perspective indicated that participants experienced some sort of cognitive rather than affective (i.e., emotional) change. Perhaps the theme of perspective is best represented by the following response:

I think it helped me put my college career into perspective. I was in the middle of mid-terms and totally stressed before I left on my AFB [alternative break] trip. My experience helped me get out of my selfish world and realize how much bigger life is than my college life.

Another individual stated, "I saw school so differently. I saw that the world was bigger than my family and circle of life at college." Statements coded as "perspective" referenced some sort of cognitive process relating to a wider acceptance or worldview through participation.

Positive intrinsic rewards comprised another theme that emerged as a short-term effect of alternative break participation. Though many participants described an increased perspective, others said that alternative break provided them with a sense of accomplishment or enjoyment, while others stated that they left alternative break feeling good, energized, happy, or even joyous. "I got to experience a feeling of joy of giving back," said one participant. Statements coded as "positive intrinsic rewards" were representative of an affective process related to positive emotions tied to the experience of alternative break.

Finally, some participants asserted that their experience with alternative breaks offered career/vocational direction, alluding to guidance in their future working life. "It formed a foundation for where I wanted my life to go in the future and the work I wanted to get into," said one participant. Another participant commented, "I left college and joined AmeriCorps as a direct result." While only a few participants made statements pertaining to the short-term effect of career/vocational direction, many more referenced career/vocational skills, not direction, as a long-term benefit.

Long-Term Benefits

Study participants noted that their alternative break experiences continued to impact them. For example, one participant stated, "I often think about my alternative break and how I was moved spiritually and emotionally." More specifically, a variety of themes emerged from the data related to the long-term effects of alternative break participation. Notably, several themes that emerged within the short-term data were also present in the long-term data. These repeated themes included: connections, positive intrinsic rewards, perspective, career/vocational direction, and commitment to service. These responses were framed in a different tense and often carried slightly more gravitas than their short-term counterparts. For instance, while participants described short-term connections with phrases like "fun way to meet new people," long-term connections were described using phrases like "life-long friends," and one participant expresses feeling "thankful for the friendships ... almost ten years later." Regarding the long-term perspective effect of alternative breaks, one participant stated,

In the long-term, I have grown to be a lot more socially aware of systemic issues, community needs, and issues of justice ... I developed a deeper understanding of myself and of how my identities/values intersect with those of other people. The experiences opened my eyes to a lot of different perspectives and ways of life that I had previously no knowledge of ... I am always trying to make more socially conscious decisions and a lot of that was sparked by my AB [alternative break] participation.

Career/vocational direction in the long-term was evident in a variety of statements, all of which echoed the following: "Helped me choose career goals. It's something I am always thinking of many years later," and "I now work in the nonprofit sector and am using what I gained from my two trips in how to recruit and retain volunteers." These statements, which indicated that career plans/goals were realized and real-world career skills were gained through alternative break participation, recurred throughout the data related to long-term effects. The participants who claimed they had received some sort of career/vocational direction as a result of alternative break participation reported their occupations in social work, higher education, and even geography, among others.

Finally, commitment to service also appeared within both short- and long-term effects of alternative break participation; again, the difference being the tense of participant responses, as well as their choice of language to describe long-term effects, with descriptions seeming to read more thoughtfully and passionately than short-term responses. Indeed, many participants claimed that they still made time for service years later, and others suggested that “it definitely encouraged me to be more giving and helpful by experiencing the conditions along with the people we were trying to help.” These themes were only differentiated between the short- and long-term by tense and tone related to time; however, some themes were specific to the long-term. The two uniquely long-term benefits of alternative break participation were extrinsic rewards and memories.

Within the theme of extrinsic rewards, some participants referred to tangible processes or goods, such as resume bolstering, though the majority referenced intangible skills. Many participants referenced rewards such as leadership, networking, problem solving, and the ability to work with diverse populations. While similar to the career/vocational skills within this theme, participants did not reference their career or work life. One statement exemplary of this category was the following: “I am able to be flexible, problem solving, and work with diverse groups of people.” Notably, these extrinsic rewards were focused outwardly, manifested through working with or leading others (e.g., working with diverse populations).

Finally, the theme of memories referenced participants’ ability to look back fondly on their experiences; many, in fact, explicitly used the term “memories.” Many participants expressed ideas that were coded as memories in conjunction with ideas coded in other ways; thus, the longer utterance was unitized into separate units of analysis based on the variety of ideas that were presented within these responses. For example, one participant who described career direction as a benefit also stated, “I have memories to look back on,” while continuing on to describe career/vocational direction. Other participants were able to reference alternative break as “one of the best experiences” during college, with one participant claiming, “In the long-term, it is truly one of my favorite memories from college.”

Hypothesis one posited that alternative breaks would have a lasting impact on participants. Eighty-four percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Participating in alternative break has had a lasting impact on me.” Seventy-two percent of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that alternative break participation had affected them since graduation. Ninety-four percent acknowledged that they often reflect fondly on their alternative break experience. Eighty-seven percent believed that participating in alternative break set them apart from other students. A majority of participants (77%) believed that alternative break provided them with experiences they were able to apply to their career or vocation. No participants agreed with the statement, “Participating in alternative break was a terrible decision”; participants either disagreed (8%) or strongly disagreed (92%) with that statement. Fifty-seven percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that alternative break participation was one of the best activities they participated in outside the classroom during college. Finally, 88% of participants claimed that the values espoused by their alternative break trips still impacted them at the time of the study. Thus, hypothesis one was supported: Alternative breaks have a lasting impact on participants.

Research question two sought to understand the types of relationships that study participants formed as a result of their alternative break experiences. Twenty percent of participants ($n = 24$) reported that, at the time of the study, they considered someone from their alternative break to be a best friend. Sixty-four percent of participants ($n = 73$) indicated that they considered another team member to be a close or good friend. When asked if they considered another team member to be a friend, 92% of participants ($n = 105$) agreed. Only 5% of participants ($n = 6$) indicated that they were currently in a romantic relationship with someone from their alternative break experience. Twelve percent of participants ($n = 14$) considered another team member to be a coworker, while 36% ($n = 42$) considered another team member to be a colleague. Finally, 94% of participants ($n = 108$) indicated that they considered another person from their alternative break experience to be an acquaintance.

Research question three inquired as to what participants deemed the most meaningful aspect of their alternative break experiences. Several themes emerged from the data: connections with other

participants, connections and interactions with community members, perspective, service experience, and personal rewards. Figure 3 offers a visual representation of the most meaningful aspects of alternative break identified by study participants.

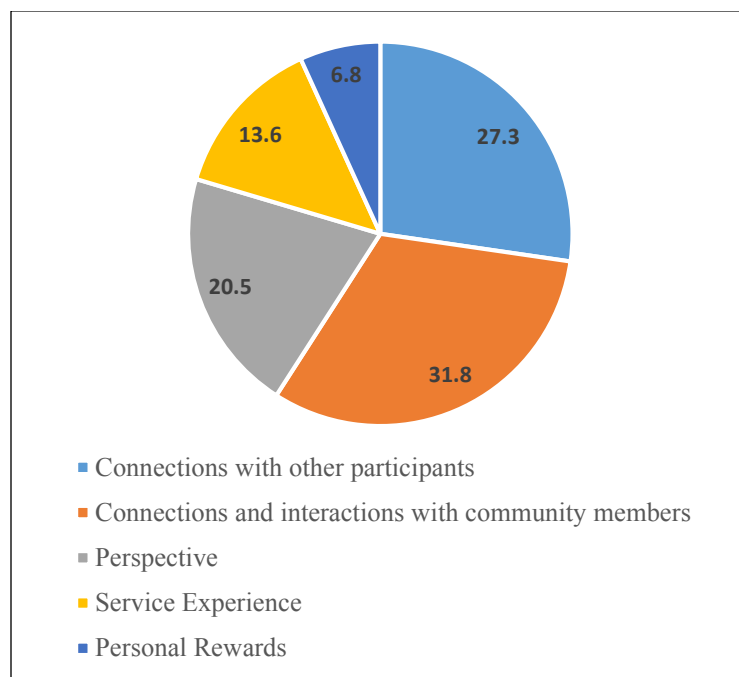


Figure 3. Meaningful aspects of alternative break participation. Note: Values represent percentage of total data regarding the most meaningful aspects of alternative break.

The theme of connections with other participants emerged through statements referencing friendships, teammates, “meeting new people,” and “forming relationships,” among others. This is not surprising, given that many participants identified connections as both a short- and long-term effect of alternative break participation. Importantly, several participants indicated that these relationships were enduring (e.g., “building lasting friendships with my teammates”) and meaningful (e.g., “the community built among the trip members was extremely meaningful to me”). Participants also made reference to meeting people they otherwise would not have (e.g., “outside this event I may not have ever met or had the chance to get to know some wonderful and inspiring people”). These responses indicated that connections formed among team members are often viewed as the most meaningful aspect of alternative break participation.

The theme of connections and interactions with community members was evident in participants’ identification of interactions or relationships with service recipients as the most meaningful feature of alternative break participation. As with the other themes, some participants expressed their thoughts in concise statements such as “getting to know the community,” “the interactions with the people at the various projects,” and “sharing in people’s lives and making their life better.” Others provided more robust descriptions of this theme. According to one participant, “the most meaningful aspect of my alternative break experience was being exposed to a different population and learning how to live life with them.” These statements demonstrate that connections and interactions with community members were often viewed as an important and meaningful component of alternative break experiences.

Perspective also emerged as an outcome that participants identified as the most meaningful aspect of alternative break participation. This theme, though complimentary, was distinct from connections and interactions with community members, described earlier. Within this theme, participants described a perspective or cognitive shift that resulted from their service participation. Statements coded as

perspective—for example, “learning the importance of helping others. It was all about perspective,” and “rebuilding someone’s home and really learning that a home is so much more than walls”—described some sort of cognitive change (e.g., perspective, learning) as a result of service. The perspective theme was also evidenced by participants describing a change in worldview or the acquisition of a deeper understanding of people, society, service, or a problem encountered during the trip.

Another theme that emerged from the data indicated that many alumni viewed the service experience itself as the most meaningful aspect of alternative break. These participants made no direct reference to the cognitive changes indicative of the perspective theme. Instead, the service experience theme was revealed through references to the service and the act of volunteering—for instance, “helping other people” and “serving the greater community.” This theme emerged from explicit references to the general concept of service or vague descriptions of projects with no indication that a cognitive change or personal interaction occurred (e.g., “the shared experience of getting to work on a project that was interesting and meaningful”).

Finally, personal rewards comprised another feature of alternative break that was deemed the “most meaningful” by participants. This theme was associated with intrinsic and extrinsic rewards such as memories and skills described earlier. One participant responded, “Fantastic memories!” while another commented that “being given leadership opportunities” was the most meaningful aspect of the alternative break experience. It is important to note that this theme was not as forceful as others (Owen, 1984) but was repeated enough to warrant classification as a theme. Most individuals who identified personal rewards as the most meaningful aspect of their alternative break also identified other meaningful aspects, which were coded as other themes.

Discussion

Our alumni sample extends service-learning research by supporting claims that alternative break involvement, like other service-learning programs and experiences, results in lasting relationships and cognitive changes (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Many of our participants reported that the most meaningful aspect of their alternative break experience was indeed the relationships formed. Further, these relationships persisted even after participants left their college or university, suggesting that perhaps these relationships have as much, if not more, meaning than those created in other campus settings (e.g., class, Greek life). Indeed, based on the way our participants described the short- and long-term effects of alternative breaks, the responses to our questions regarding their relationships (i.e., hypothesis two), and the results of research question two—particularly the finding that 92% of participants indicated that they would still describe a former alternative break peer as a friend—we feel confident concluding that lasting connections are formed through alternative breaks. Further, even when participants reported a loss of contact with peers and others from their college or university years, it is possible that relationships formed during this time still had a meaningful impact on their development (Chickering, 1969) and success (Tinto, 2006). Notably, relationship formation was not the only long-term impact that participants reported.

Even years after the conclusion of their alternative break, many participants claimed that the experience had had an indelible impact on the way they viewed and approached the world. Our results, along with tenets of service-learning practice put forward by Eyler and Giles (1999), suggest that interactions between participants and service recipients (i.e., interpersonal communication) contribute meaningfully to this perspective change. Future research should focus on gaining a more thorough and nuanced understanding of how these interactions occur and how they might best be facilitated. Indeed, while our data indicated that participants remained connected to those they served alongside, our investigation did not capture any indication that participants remained committed to the specific types of service they performed on alternative break (our data typically indicated an overall commitment to service, with notable exceptions). Future research should also seek to assess whether or not participants remain committed to the types of service they performed on alternative break, or perhaps even the specific agencies or locales where they performed the service.

Until recently, researchers had not focused on the relationship between career/vocational development and alternative break participation (Niehaus & Inkelas, 2015). However, Niehaus and Inkelas (2015) found that alternative break experiences both reinforced students' existing career and major choices and also exposed them to new career options. Similarly, Astin et al. (2000) reported that service-learning participation significantly impacted student's desire to participate in service post-graduation or to pursue a career that included service. The current study supported these findings; specifically, our participants reported that they received some form of career or vocational guidance as a result of participating in alternative breaks. Again, the majority of previous research is based on course-based service-learning, and even Niehaus and Inkelas, who claimed similar findings, identified alternative breaks as co-curricular rather than extra-curricular. Given that research has demonstrated that course-based service-learning (i.e., co-curricular) and extra-curricular service-learning differ experientially for students (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2007), this is an important and notable finding. As the current study investigated non-course-based extra-curricular programs, these findings indicate that alternative breaks, and perhaps other extra-curricular activities, could serve a larger purpose than previous research has suggested.

Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications. First, considering that relationships among participants comprised a significant outcome of alternative break participation, practitioners should work to create situations wherein relationship formation is encouraged but not forced. For example, facilitators might utilize pre-experience meetings as a form of socialization wherein students learn what to expect and how to be a contributing team member. Further, allowing students to build relationships prior to departing for alternative break could result in higher quality (i.e., deeper or more intimate) communication during the experience, allowing students to more thoroughly process and engage with service and, ultimately, to reap more benefits from the service experiences.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, practitioners should make certain to root alternative break experiences in meaningful service, not social activities. Stated another way, alternative breaks should be grounded in service undertaken for a specific reason, not simply to fulfill the service component of the trip. Practitioners and students should work alongside community partners to make sure that planned service activities address a distinct need of the community, organization, or population. The meaningfulness of any given service activity can be addressed specifically during reflection so that participants are sure to understand the impact that even a seemingly innocuous task could have. Indeed, many participants in this study reported that they continued to care about and perform service activities well after the completion of their trip; these individuals likely would not have continued to engage in service if their break trip service had not been meaningful. One way to ensure that service is meaningful is to allow and encourage participants to interact with service recipients (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005). Notably, participants should be trained and prepared to act respectfully toward service recipients and avoid a perception that they are simply tourists in the service recipients' very real struggles (Ver Beek, 2002). Thus, service must be undertaken under the guidance of experienced service providers and programs that can help participants and practitioners alike experience meaningful service. If practitioners appropriately prepare students for service while simultaneously grounding the alternative break experience in meaningful service, students will be better able to utilize the relationships they form among peers to more thoroughly process their experience during and after the trip, as demonstrated within this study and elsewhere (Jones et al., 2012).

Interestingly, our data indicated that alumni were still quite aware of their alternative break experiences. As such, we encourage professionals to create alumni events that serve a variety of purposes. For example, such events may serve as networking opportunities for alumni and current participants alike. Also, because alumni may be willing to donate to the programs upon which they reflect fondly, such events could allow practitioners to work with university development officers to raise

funds to support alternative breaks. By creating a strong alternative break alumni network, new opportunities for alternative break sites and service opportunities may be forged.

Finally, practitioners should take care to help students engage in reflection activities that allow them to accurately process their experiences in order to gain the perspective identified by our participants as one of the most meaningful aspects of alternative break. Indeed, reflection is a critical component of any service-learning experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Our participants indicated that gains made through authentic and thorough reflection (i.e., perspective) do last well after graduation; thus, we suggest that without proper and meaningful reflection, it is entirely plausible that some of the gains described by our participants may not be achieved. Service-learning professionals cannot assume that participants will meaningfully process their experiences without proper guidance. Indeed, others have noted that highly structured reflection may be less impactful than more fluid forms of processing (Boswell, 2010). As such, we suggest that professionals work to train faculty, staff, and peer leaders in multiple modes of reflection so that reflection may be substantive rather than perfunctory. By making certain that participants thoroughly and authentically process their experience while still in school, service-learning professionals can ensure that, upon graduation, individuals will have experienced cognitive gains that will persist throughout their lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study utilized a convenience-snowball sample of past graduates (i.e., alumni) who completed an alternative break experience during college. It is possible that individuals who had poor experiences—regarding their experiences either with the service or with peers—did not participate. In the future, researchers should partner with institutional programs rather than their own networks to obtain a more representative sample of alternative break participants who, due to potentially more diverse experiences, will better reflect the range of outcomes of these experiences. However, others who have investigated service-learning (e.g., Pechak & Thompson, 2011) and alumni perceptions (e.g., Underhill & Langdon, 2013) have successfully used snowball sampling techniques.

Further, future research should employ designs that allow researchers to arrive at conclusions that are more robust and more nuanced. Future research could, for instance, employ designs that assess how many specific programs are represented within a large dataset. Such efforts could lead to identification of best practices from schools where students report high impact from participation. Designs that account for specific practices related to participants' breaks may also offer insight into the role of pre-training, team socialization, reflection type, service type, or a host of other factors that have been found to impact a participant's alternative break experience (e.g., Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). Designs that employ single-site analysis, in-depth interviews, or ethnographies may provide scholars and practitioners alike with more detail regarding the experiences and processes of alternative break. Further, future research should attempt to consider the community wherein alternative breaks occur. In doing so, researchers may be able to develop a more thorough understanding of the importance, or lack thereof, of alternative break. Overall, the use of other non-cross-sectional and non-participant-based research designs may provide insight into alternative break experiences.

While our study did reveal that relationships formed through alternative break are maintained by alumni—a process that must occur through communication (Canary & Stafford, 1994)—we did not investigate the specific strategies that they employ to maintain these relationships. Thus, future research should continue to investigate how alumni maintain their relationships; these strategies could be different based on how and why the relationship formed. For example, alumni who belonged to fraternities/sororities may maintain their relationships in very different ways from those who forged relationships through service-learning opportunities or other campus activities. In short, the relational maintenance that occurs among college alumni is an area of scholarship that deserves attention, and we encourage researchers to consider context when engaging in these investigations. Such information could be useful for practitioners for a variety of reasons such as fundraising, networking for current students, or even developing service opportunities for alumni.

Future research should also continue to examine the role of specific programs in creating engaged alumni. Ifert-Johnson (2004) found that involvement in college led to involvement after college in alumni communities. However, Ifert-Johnson did not examine involvement in a specific program or alumni involvement with their alma mater. Volkwein (2010) suggested that alumni outcomes could be assessed along a variety of metrics such as participation in alumni associations, monetary giving, mentoring, and recruiting current students, among other possibilities. Therefore, future research should explore a specific program's role in these outcomes.

Conclusion

College can be a turbulent time for students as they are still developing their identities (Chickering, 1969). Successful students leave college with both meaningful relationships (Tinto, 2006) and cognitive changes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Our data support previous claims that alternative break allows students to experience both of these gains, while extending the knowledge base to arrive at the conclusion that the gains reaped from alternative break persist well after graduation. Indeed, alternative break participation leads to positive experiences that result in many of the positive hallmarks associated with higher education such as the development of mature relationships, perspective change, and a commitment to citizenship (in this case, service); thus, alternative breaks need ample support to grow and continue to thrive so that future students may arrive at the same benefits described by our sample. Though alternative breaks are not a solution to all problems affecting retention, persistence, success, or other difficulties faced by students, these programs, when thoughtfully undertaken and facilitated, do impact students in meaningful, powerful, and largely positive ways that extend well beyond graduation—and should thus be encouraged and supported.

Author Note

Zac D. Johnson, Department of Human Communication Studies, California State University, Fullerton; Matthew M. Martin, Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Zac D. Johnson, Department of Human Communication Studies, California State University, Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd., Fullerton, CA 92834-8686. Phone: (657) 278-3104. E-mail: zjohnson@fullerton.edu

References

- Antonio, A. L. (2001). Diversity and influence of friendship groups in college. *Review of Higher Education*, 25, 63-89. doi:10.1353/rhe.2001.0013
- Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). *How service-learning affects students*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.
- Barclay, W. (2010). *Alternative spring break and internalization: A qualitative study using Chickering's theory of student development* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 750170977)
- Bohon, A. E. (2007). Alternative spring break exchange: A case study at the community college level. *Inquiry*, 12, 62-67.
- Boswell, L. (2010). *The structure trap: Students' perceptions of reflection on a co-curricular immersion service learning trip* (Unpublished master's thesis). Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA.

- Bowen, G. A. (2011). Fostering college students' civic commitment through alternative breaks. *Journal for Civic Commitment*, 16, 1-13.
- Boyle-Baise, M., & Langford, J. (2004). There are children here: Service-learning for social justice. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 37, 55-66. doi:10.1080/10665680490422115
- Break Away. (2017). Movement lexicon. Retrieved from <http://alternativebreaks.org/learn/lexicon/>
- Burleson, B. R., & Samter, W. (1996). Similarity in the communication skills of young adults: Foundations of attraction, friendship, and relational satisfaction. *Communication Research*, 9, 127-139. Doi:10.1080/08934219609367645
- Campus Compact. (2011). *2011 annual membership survey results: Executive summary*. Retrieved from <http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/11/2011-Annual-Survey-Executive-Summary.pdf>
- Canary, D. J., & Stafford, L. (1994). Maintaining relationships through strategic and routine interaction. In D. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance*. (pp. 3-22). San Diego: Academic Press.
- Chickering, A. (1969). *Education and identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DuPre, C. (2010). Campus commons: Alternative break service trips. *About Campus*, 15, 25-28. doi:10.1002/abc.20026
- Ellis, K. (2000). Perceived teacher confirmation: The development and validation of an instrument and two studies of the relationship to cognitive and affective learning. *Human Communication Research*, 26, 264-291. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.200.tb00758.x
- Einfeld, A., & Collins, D. (2008). The relationships between service-learning, social justice, multicultural competence, and civic engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49, 95-109. Doi:10.1353/csd.2008.0017
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Garbuio, J. A. (1999). *Alternative spring break and social responsibility is there a relationship?* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.
- Gumpert, J., & Kraybill-Greggo, J. W. (2005). Affecting attitudes toward the poor through group process: The alternative spring break trip. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 10, 109-124.
- Heldman, C. (2011). Solidarity, not charity: Issues of privilege in service-learning. In C. Cress, D. Donahue, & Associates (Eds.), *Democratic dilemmas of teaching service-learning: Curricular strategies for success* (pp. 33-42). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P., & Raskoff, S. (1994). Community service-learning: Promises and problems. *Teaching Sociology*, 22, 248-254.
- Hui, S. M-Y. (2009). *"Haikus in the subway": Understanding student meaning-making of an alternative spring break trip* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 304923411)
- Ifert-Johnson, D. (2004). Relationships between college experiences and alumni participation in the community. *Review of Higher Education*, 27, 169-185. doi:10.1353/rhe.2003.0061
- Johnson, Z. D., & LaBelle, S. (2015). Student-to-student confirmation in the college classroom: An initial investigation of the dimensions and outcomes of students' confirming messages. *Communication Education*, 64, 154-170. doi:10.1080/03634523.2014.978800
- Jones, S. R., LePeau, L. A., & Robbins, C. K. (2013). Exploring the possibilities and limitations of service-learning: A critical analysis of college student narratives about HIV/AIDS. *Journal of Higher Education*, 84, 213-238. doi:10.1353/jhe.2013.0010

- Jones, S. R., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Ireland, S. M., Niehaus, E., & Skendall, K. C. (2012). The meaning students make as participants in short-term immersion programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53, 201-220. doi:10.1353/csd.2012.0026
- Kuh, G. D. (1995). The other curriculum: Out-of-class experiences associated with student learning and personal development. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66, 123-155. doi:10.2307/2943909
- Ledbetter, A. M., Griffin, E. M., & Sparks, G. G. (2007). Forecasting “friends forever”: A longitudinal investigation of sustained closeness between best friends. *Personal Relationships*, 14, 343-350. Doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2007.00158.x
- McElhaney, K. A. (1998). *Student outcomes of community service-learning: A comparative study of curriculum based and non-curriculum based alternative spring break programs* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 304434459)
- Niehaus, E., & Inkelas, K. K. (2015). Exploring the role of alternative break programs in students’ career development. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 52, 134-148. doi:10.1080/19496591.2015.1020247
- Noll, C. A. (2012). *An alternative spring break of leadership and service: Interpreting the servant leadership, motivations, and service participation of millennials who participated in project LEAD between the years 2008-2010* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 936015593)
- Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 274-287. doi:10.1080/00335638409383697
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pechak, C., & Thompson, M. (2011). Going global in physical therapist education: International service-learning in U.S.-based programmes. *Physiotherapy Research International*, 16, 225-236. doi:10.1002/pri.501
- Piacitelli, J., Barwick, M., Doerr, E., Porter, M., & Sumka, S. (2013). Alternative break programs: From isolated enthusiasm to best practices. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 17, 87-109.
- Pistole, M. C., & Vocaturo, L. C. (1999). Attachment and commitment in college students’ romantic relationships. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40, 710-720.
- Plante, T. G., Lackey, K., & Hwang, J. I. (2009). The impact of immersion trips on development of compassion among college students. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 32, 28-43.
- Rice, R. E., Steward, L. P., & Hujber, M. (2000). Extending the domain of instructional effectiveness assessment in student evaluations of communication courses. *Communication Education*, 49, 253-266. doi:10.1080/036345200009379214
- Rhoades, R. A., & Neururer, J. (1998). Alternative spring break: Learning through community service. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 35, 83-101. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.1039
- Squillace, J. (2014). Short immersion trips for rural students in social work. *Journal of Civic Commitment*, 21, 1-16.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 8, 1-19. doi:10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W
- Underhill, B., & Langdon, S. (2013). Licit and illicit use of prescription psychostimulants in upperclassmen and alumni. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, 57, 7-26.
- Ver Beek, K. (2002). International service learning: A call to caution. In G. Heffner & C. Beversluis (Eds.), *Commitment and connection: Service learning and Christian higher education* (pp. 55–69). New York: University Press of America.
- Volkwein, J. F. (2010). Assessing alumni outcomes. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2010, 125-139. doi:10.1002/ir.335

