

Give alternative spring break programs a try

By Larry W. Lunsford

How would I — someone who is eligible for a senior citizen discount in many places — survive a week-long excursion with nine college students working in a Costa Rican rain forest?

That's a question I asked myself when approached by Alternative Break staff from Florida International University's Center for Leadership and Service to join a group of students on an AB trip to Costa Rica.

Seven international AB sites support FIU's Quality Enhancement Plan. The idea is to further the university's Global Learning for Global Citizenship theme as part of our Southern Association of Colleges and Schools reaccreditation. The trips enable students to serve as engaged global citizens and develop global awareness and perspective.

I agreed to go on the trip to the Volcano Tenorio National Park during spring break this past semester, but as a participant, not an administrator. I wanted first-hand experience, not as an observer.

The first day at our site, we took a four-hour hike through the rain forest. It was a challenging ordeal that prepared us for the workdays ahead. Our guide

took us down a newly carved, muddy path along a steep mountainside that led to the waterfall. We held onto roots, trees and rocks to try to keep from falling, but some of us fell anyway.

This path clearly needed improvement so visitors could safely traverse. In fact, we learned our AB project would be building steps on this slippery path.

It was a daunting task. We had to carry gravel and heavy rocks into the rain forest in wheel barrels until we could no longer get through the rugged terrain. Then we transferred the rocks and gravel to sacks slung over shoulders or hand-carried to the next destination.

Forest rangers and local Bijaguans directed the work as the rocks were ground into place and sticks pounded into the ground to keep the rocks in place. The work was tedious, difficult and long. We completed only a small area after hours of diligent work.

Each member of the FIU delegation left Costa Rica exhausted, but with a keen sense of accomplishment and a deeper appreciation of the environment. Hopefully, students will transfer this sentiment to others through continued good deeds. ■

About the author

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Develop successful alternative spring break programs

More colleges and universities are embracing alternative spring break programs. Instead of spending break in leisure, participating students devote their time to a humanitarian, environmental or animal-related project in a domestic or international location.

Now's the time to begin planning an AB trip for spring. Next, you can plan a fall trip and a summer trip.

We recruit students through campus fliers, ads and articles in the student newspaper, and word-of-mouth through previous participants.

Students hold fundraisers throughout the year to support the effort. And the FIU Student Government Association allocates an annual stipend for the trips.

Students attend months of sessions on expectations, safety and health issues, and site information. On trips, students must follow the on-campus conduct code.

To develop a successful alternative spring break program at your college, follow these steps:

- ✓ Form a student steering committee and identify

a faculty or staff advisor.

- ✓ Develop a vision and mission statement for the trip.
- ✓ Join Break Away, the national alternative break organization (www.alternativebreaks.org). It can help start new programs.
- ✓ Identify potential student site leaders.
- ✓ Set goals and timelines for trip planning.
- ✓ Research service sites.
- ✓ Begin your fundraising efforts.
- ✓ Ask student government association for support.
- ✓ Develop recruitment and marketing plans.
- ✓ Hold information sessions for students.
- ✓ Create and distribute applications.
- ✓ Select participants based on your criteria.
- ✓ Keep in close contact with the service sites.
- ✓ Educate and train the participants.
- ✓ Continue your fundraising efforts.
- ✓ Finalize your trip itinerary. ■

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