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Sensational Service Through Transformational Travel

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Sensational Service Through Transformational Travel

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SLCE Department

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Sensational Service Through Transformational Travel - Abstract

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Travel and service are two fundamental activities for me. One way I have been able to combine these experiences and cultivate my love for them is through the University of Wyoming's Alternative Breaks Program. The mission of this program is, "to engage the University of Wyoming community in service and experiential learning while promoting global citizenship". The goals for students include, but are not limited to, "enact positive change through service, develop a stronger community between students, empower student leaders, becoming further educated on social justice issues, as well as encourage students to become active citizens". It is through the Alternative Breaks program that I have been able to see positive changes in myself, as I have reached some of the goals outlined for students.

My first exposure to Alternative Breaks was during my sophomore year, when I went to Kanab, Utah. We worked with Best Friends Animal Sanctuary while focusing on animal wellness for this trip. One year later, I went to Matelot, Trinidad. The focus of this trip was community development and women's education. The two trips were drastically different, while remaining equally impactful. This year, I have the tremendous opportunity to co-lead a trip to Arizona in March 2018. The goal for this trip is to learn about, and provide service for immigration rights and reform. To do so, we will work with non-profit organizations in Tucson and Phoenix, getting exposure to people whose lives are affected by immigration rights on a daily basis.

Keywords: Alternative Breaks, Service, Learning, Immigration, Arizona

I have been participating in the University of Wyoming's Service Leadership and Community Engagement (SLCE) department for three years. My first time participating was as a sophomore during spring break, when I joined the trip to Kanab, Utah. There, we worked with Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, focusing on animal wellness. We spent time cleaning various enclosures – from dogs and cats, to horses and rabbits, to pigs and goats – and we had a tremendous educational component to the trip. Needless to say, I was instantly enamored with SLCE and Alternative Breaks, after such an incredibly successful initiation to the department. My second time participating was one year later, during my junior year spring break. This time, I travelled internationally to Matelot, Trinidad, where we worked with the DORCAS women's group, and focused on community development and women's education. We spent some time with the DORCAS women, sitting in on one of their meetings and we spent time at the local elementary school. Some of our time was spent raking up leaves and picking up litter, but most of our service time was spent building a community center for the youth. Trinidad, similar to Kanab, was also an incredibly influential experience for me.

This year, having an even greater appreciation for how impactful these alternative breaks trips are, I decided I was interested in leading one. After a painless interview process, I felt honored to be one of the twelve students selected to lead an alternative spring break trip. In the fall, I was assigned a co-leader, and our destination of Arizona, with a focus on immigration. I was fortunate – my co-leader had been my leader for Kanab, so not only did I have an already good relationship with her, but she also had some experience leading a trip before, giving us some experience to draw from. I was also lucky in terms of the destination and focus. Immigration is not something that affects my life on a daily basis – the more recent generations of my family did not face immigration, and for the majority of my life, I have not lived in a border state. I was glad to have a focus of something that I was less familiar with, the opportunity to become more intimate with immigration and the complexities that surround it, and to be going to a refreshingly warm state in early March.

Even though the Alternative Spring Break trips do not happen until March, planning for the trips start the fall before. All of the leaders meet as a class on Monday nights, where we talked about our progress on planning – from contacting nonprofits to work with to lodging and other accommodations. We would also discuss what it means to be an active citizen and skills that make an effective leader. With our co-leader, we would also hold individual trip “office hours”, where we had the opportunity to focus on our trip – in my case, Arizona – and start planning. My co-leader and I were successfully able to find lodging for the week of spring break, as well as establish contact with some nonprofit organizations we intended to work with in Tucson, and identify some nonprofits we hoped to work with in Phoenix.

The spring semester started with a similar structure to the fall semester; the difference being in an impending timeline, with a little more urgency to finalize plans for our trip. In terms of the plans for the trip, with the various logistics involved, my co-leader and I were doing well. We were able to stay on top of everything, without getting too overwhelmed. We struggled in terms of participants. Although these trips strive to have ten participants with two trip leaders, we did not have any participants signed up for Arizona until two weeks prior to the actual trip.

This was an unexpected stressor for me. I was excited for Arizona, and this was my third year to be enthusiastic about Alternative Breaks. I could not figure out why our trip was struggling to fill with participants. Our trip was not the only one to have difficulties though. Unfortunately, the team originally going to Taos, New Mexico was struggling to get both participants and nonprofit organizations with which to work. Due to this, two weeks before we left for spring break, we consolidated our trips. We now had four leaders and four participants going to Tucson and Phoenix, focusing on immigration. Before we left for Arizona, we were able to meet up as a group twice, allowing us to get to know one another a little bit more before spending 14 hours in a van together. As a participant, it is almost natural to just come along for the ride on a service trip. Even before the trip took place, all the planning that goes into an Alternative Breaks trip makes being a leader an entirely different process. I certainly did not

feel as if I were simply going with the flow; instead I felt more like I was manipulating the flow. These first experiences of being a leader of a group of volunteers was the beginning of my transformational process – for leading, for service work, and for travelling.

Bright, but not too early, we headed out. We drove all day, making various stops to switch out drivers between the four leaders, get gas, and food. It was a long day of driving, seemingly made longer due to our unfamiliarity with our participants. They were shy, quietly sitting in the back rows of the van and going along with when and where the leaders decided to stop. We drove to Sunland Park, New Mexico that first day, popping over to El Paso for a nice team dinner. Our first hurdle was a monetary complication with our housing for the night. The original reservation was not what we anticipated, and there were some questions about how much we were charged. Another co-leader and I tackled this slight complication (while the other two co-leaders took care of the participants and the van), figuring out where the misunderstanding occurred, and fixing the charges so that we were not double charged. This was my first indication of how well the four leaders on this trip worked seamlessly together.

Monday was our first day of service. Due to hot temperatures in Arizona, we started early, meeting the Tucson Samaritans at the Presbyterian Church. Before setting out for the desert, we met with two Samaritans, and another volunteer from Chicago; and we loaded their vehicle with a bunch of gallon jugs of water and some canned food. Then we followed them out to the desert, through some rough dirt roads, creating a bumpy ride. One of our first stops along the way was at a grave of an infant, marked by rocks. This was difficult for our group to see – they had tried to mark the grave with a cross in the past, but groups of people who are strongly against immigration took the marker away. They also were not able to give the body to any relatives, as immigrants travel without identification.

Once further in the desert, we went to a number of different water drop sites to leave our food and jugs of water, and take away the empty jugs. The drop sites were interesting. They were located at

the places where immigrants often traverse through, and they had tubs where we put food, a varying number of water jugs (depending on the popularity of the spot – more popular spots had more water), and blankets for when it gets cold during the night. One of the Samaritans told us how at one time, the water drop sites used to be closer to the main trails, more obvious. However, similar to those who take the crosses that mark graves, there are individuals who sabotage the Samaritans' effort, slashing the water jugs to dump the water left for the immigrants. The Samaritans also made the point that many of the immigrants do not want to be seen while they are traversing the desert, for obvious reasons. They said that on average, they might see one individual a year. We did not see any immigrants on the day we dropped water along the border. I can only begin to imagine what an immigrant goes through – emotionally, physically, and financially, to name a few factors. Yet, I like to think that I have a better grasp on understanding, and therefore sympathizing, with them, thanks to the service we did with the Tucson Samaritans.

As we were finishing up our time with the Samaritans, they gave us an idea for an educational experience – they suggested we go to the border, which we eagerly agreed to do! It was a short drive to Sasabe, the small Arizona town right along the border to Mexico. At first, it was a bit intimidating, and even scary, because we thought we were driving to Mexico; something we were not intending to do. The guards at Border Control were kind though, and directed us to their secondary inspection area to give us a place to park. One of their officers came out and talked to us about what a typical day at Border Control looks like. He discussed his ideas of immigration, particularly the legality side of it. He talked to us about some children from Mexico, that cross the border every day to go to school in Sasabe; and how they try to be friendly with them, without being too friendly so that the children maintain respect for authority. He talked to us about the wall, and took us to the space after the wall, where there is still about three feet of US territory, to show us the actual line that divides the two countries.

This was an incredible learning experience. I did not agree with everything the officer told us, but I recognize that he is entitled to his opinions about immigration, just as I am. What I liked most about this experience was how it gave me a full, 360° view on immigration. Although not done so by The Samaritans, I feel as if Border Control, and the entire legal side of immigration is villainized. Having had this educational opportunity, I feel like I can have an appreciation for both sides. Neither side is a villain, but neither side is a victim either. This was something I learned about my personal philosophy of completing service – it is incredibly important to have a wholistic perspective, as opposed to a biased perspective, no matter how much I agree or disagree with the cause.

The following day, one of our participants was ill, so he stayed home for the day, while the rest of the group went to volunteer with our second organization: Iskashitaa. The service itself for this organization was excellent. We spent the day harvesting fruit from a few different houses in the area, which was very instantly gratifying (between our two groups, we went to 3 locations, and harvested fruit from 5 trees). We could physically feel the work we were doing and see how much fruit we harvested as we took it off trees and put it into totes. To maximize our efficiency as a group, we split into two smaller groups, going to different locations, each with a different member of Iskashitaa as our leader.

Harvesting fruit was interesting – it was not something I had previously done before. I learned that people within the Tucson community can request Iskashitaa to come to their houses to pick their trees clean of fruit before the fruit goes bad. The fruit that gets picked then goes through a sorting process and is finally given to refugees and immigrants. My group went to two different houses for a couple hours, picking lemon trees, pink grapefruit trees, and sweet orange trees. It was also a very educational experience. The Iskashitaa member we were working with taught us a lot about citrus, showing us the difference between leaves of various fruits, and demonstrating tree grafting.

After harvesting over 3,000 pounds of fruit, the group came together to form one group for the rest of the day. This is when we did the post-harvest sorting of the fruit. We sorted the fruit into four categories: “compost”, “first-out”, “too small”, and “good”. The “compost” category was for fruit that was “bad” – either the fruit was rotten, had too big of a bruise, or had damage to the exterior like a puncture wound or a tear in the peel. “First-out” was fruit that was still good but needed to be the fruit that was given out to refugees before the other fruit. “Too small” is exactly what it sounds like – fruit that was too small to be used as whole fruit given to the refugees and their families. Usually, this fruit ends up getting juiced. Finally, the “good” category was for the rest of the fruit – fruit that was healthy, and in good condition to last a few days. This process of sorting was relatively subjective, so we had guidance from the members of Iskashitaa, and it was a tedious process that took a while. Not only did we sort through the 3,000 pounds of fruit we harvested, but we also helped to catch them up on sorting fruit that had piled up from a couple days before we got there.

At the end of the day, we stacked up the sorted fruit in the totes against the wall, making sure to put labels on each tote to identify which fruit was in the tote, designating if it was “first-out” or “good”, and noting the date. The “too small” got set aside as well. Iskashitaa has a compost at the back of their establishment, and we used it heavily by adding our “compost” pile. We also took the time to turn over their compost pile, and cut the fruit we were adding to it, to make the compost process work more efficiently.

As previously noted, the service part of the day, and the educational component were positive experiences. However, there were some less positive aspects to that day – particularly the organization and conduct of the employees, and the leadership that occurred between my co-leaders and me. I felt as if there was a lack of communication between my co-leaders and myself for that day. A large part of this is attributable to being split into two groups during the harvesting time. I ended up being split off from my other leaders, taking myself out of our circle of communication. This led to some tension

between the leaders, particularly when we were all tired from the day's work, and hungry. This seemed to compound the issue for the remainder of the day, and we struggled to make decisions for the next day as a team. It took a full group discussion, including our participants, to come to agreements. Despite this bumpy portion in leadership, it was the only bumpy portion. None of us were unprofessional, and we all remained civil with each other.

It was evident to the leaders how that amount of tension and that lack of communication would not make the trip successful, so it was an issue we solved quickly. That night, my original co-leader and I had a long discussion where we talked about what went wrong during the day – why I felt that we had a lack of communication and what made it a day of less than desirable leadership. Having this talk, where we were both calm, understanding, and in no way upset with one another was incredibly productive. It made us more aware of our communication levels throughout the week, and more sensitive and understanding with our other co-leaders. Although unintentional, I also found this discussion to be a good leadership skill. We did not simply brush an issue under the rug or let it fester. We talked about it, we discussed the ins and outs of the day, what went well, and what did not. We took a progressive step to make something that was not as positive a learning opportunity, to improve our leadership skills for the remainder of the trip.

In this discussion, we also talked about Iskashitaa, discovering that the organization itself held a lot of the frustration we were feeling (likely accounting for some of the tension between my co-leaders and myself). Despite the positive service component, there were a lot of other aspects of Iskashitaa that were off-putting. First was the conduct of the personnel. When we arrived, we were greeted, but not welcomed. We proceeded to wait around for a half hour before a different member came out to talk to us. We did not communicate with our point of contact for the organization until about an hour into our day with them, something we found to be somewhat disappointing. Additionally, while we understand needing to accommodate individual schedules, our point of contact – the volunteer coordinator – did

not join in on the post-harvest work and left early for the day. This was particularly frustrating, considering we stayed significantly past the time we were scheduled to work with them, to help catch them up on some post-harvesting work. I will note that we stayed willingly, for the reason of feeling productive with the service we were accomplishing.

Other issues of concern were health and safety. The organization had us working in their large compost pile, cutting up bad fruit with a machete to add to it, and turning it over to help it work more efficiently. However, despite the fumes and bugs infested in the pile, we were not given gloves or masks, or any other protective equipment. Additionally, there was an issue with lunch. The two members of Iskashitaa who acted as our leaders for the two groups we split off into did not communicate clearly. This led my group to be harvesting fruit an hour longer than the other group. However, I had the groups' lunches, leaving the other group hungry and waiting for an hour without food. One of our participants was suffering from a little bit of heat exhaustion and did not feel good as a result. My co-leaders did their best to take care of her. However, from what I understand, the members of Iskashitaa continually tried to get our participant to keep working on the post-harvest work with the rest of our group, while the members of Iskashitaa ate lunch. This greatly frustrated me when I learned of it. Our small group of volunteers does not require special treatment, but I believe we deserve fair, kind treatment.

The following day was our allotted recreational day, which we used to drive to Phoenix. That evening we partook in an educational experience that was not organized officially or unofficially through nonprofit organizations. Seeing as the majority of the group consists of our homes being in Wyoming, or nearby, many of us were unfamiliar with the desert climate and culture. Therefore, our educational experience was to visit the Desert Botanical Gardens. We had excellent timing – we arrived with enough time before the sun set, to see the landscape in full daylight. We stayed long enough to see the gardens during sunset, and in the dark. This gave us an appreciation for what immigrants go through when

crossing the border. Since temperatures are so high in the day, many immigrants cross the desert under the cover of night, but that introduces a whole new host of complications (like nocturnal animals and potentially harming themselves due to not being able to see the landscape as clearly as they can in daylight). This educational experience shed a new light on our service learning trip and was a welcome change of pace for our trip.

Although not for lack of effort, one struggle my co-leaders had in preparing for our trip was acquiring nonprofit organizations in Phoenix to work with during the part of the week we were there. While we were successfully able to commit to one organization for one afternoon, this left us with a day and a half to fill. Our plan was to start the next day with a hike and spend the rest of the day going to various museums in the Phoenix area, to learn about the history of the area and some more about immigration and the role it plays in a border state. However, the day did not go according to plan.

We started at Pinnacle Peak, a popular trail in Scottsdale, Arizona, that was not too hard, but hard enough to get our hearts pumping a little harder. Part way through the hike, however, one of our participants stumbled on the surface, slipping on the rocks and twisting her ankle. She was in enough pain to cause her tears, and she could not walk down the rest of the mountain. My co-leaders and I jumped into action. As I helped our participant get to the side of the trail, one co-leader wrangled the other participants, another called EMS and our Alternative Breaks coordinator, and my last co-leader ran ahead on the trail to find help.

It took awhile for EMS to arrive, and while we waited as a family, the community on the mountain was incredibly supportive and friendly. Almost all who passed us gave a sympathetic greeting, asking if we had help on the way, or enough water, or even if we were okay. It was very kind, and a comfort to us. Once EMS arrived, they were able to take care of our participant much more efficiently and professionally than we were able to, and they got her off Pinnacle Peak. I followed our participant

and the EMS personnel down the rest of the way to the road, and I rode in the ambulance with our participant to the local hospital. The rest of the group went back the way we came and met us at the hospital. From there, we decided that while I waited with our participant to get x-rays, and see how badly she hurt her ankle, the rest of the group would go get acai bowls – fulfilling a request of another participant, while killing a little time waiting for the group to get back together as a whole.

Needless to say, the impromptu hospital visit took the rest of the day, so we did not make it to museums to increase our educational experiences on the trip. This entire event proved to be incredibly frustrating. Not only were our original plans derailed, but an entire day seemed to be wasted waiting around for what the doctors had to say next. Possibly the worst part of all was the participant's attitude from that point on throughout the rest of the trip. She was sullen and moody, and her depression weighed on the group dynamic.

There was some good to come out of the entire experience – it was not all bad. From a personal and selfish standpoint, I am highly interested in medicine and emergency care. While I did not like the stress of having one of my participants becoming injured, I relished the opportunity to receive the close-up view of an emergency care situation. Even better, however, was the way my co-leaders and I worked together. When our participant fell, and we knew something was wrong, we literally jumped into action to take care of the situation. Ironically, considering the dilemma we faced earlier in the week, the best part was how little communication was needed. We each fulfilled our roles, without having to communicate and dictate who needed to do what. Our leadership for that day was seamless, and we were able to turn a highly stressful situation into one that flowed smoothly. I found the situation to exemplify our adaptability. Bearing in mind how malleable the leaders and plans for the Arizona spring break trip were, “rolling with the punches” became something we all did well.

We got back on track the following day, starting at the Arizona State Capitol Museum. This was a well done, free museum, that touched on art, history, and governmental aspects of both Phoenix specifically, and Arizona generally. It was extensive, without being overwhelming, and seemed to fill our void of wanting to get an educational experience about Arizona from one of their museums. From there, we spent the afternoon with our third nonprofit organization for the week: Trans Queer Pueblo.

This organization was absolutely amazing – alone, they made the Phoenix portion of our trip entirely worth it. We started our time with them with a designated educational session. This was a small group activity, where we talked about the history of gender identification and fluidity, particularly in rural areas like Wyoming and Arizona. This was highly educational, and all of us were able to benefit from this. Afterwards, we assisted another member of Trans Queer Pueblo in building a bench and planting a Ficus tree. We stained and sanded the wood and cleared the area where the tree and bench were going to be. After putting the bench together, we planted some succulents on the side, and then we planted the tree a short distance away from the bench.

Something I found particularly interesting about the planting part was the decoration. When we finished planting the succulents and tree, we decorated the area around them with rocks and pebbles. While it looked beautiful in the end, that was not something I was used to. Growing up in Wyoming, whenever my family and I planted something, we would leave a raw mound of dirt surrounding the freshly transplanted plant. I do not normally adorn plants with surrounding rocks to make them better grafted to the landscape.

Similar to our experience with Iskashitaa, our work with Trans Queer Pueblo was also instantly gratifying. We had physical evidence of the hard work we had completed, and we know that both the bench and tree will be there for many years to come – it is rewarding to leave a little mark from Wyoming. I also noticed a recurring feeling I have experienced from other trips with Alternative Breaks.

In Matelot, Trinidad, there were almost too many of us volunteering. We worked incredibly efficiently, accomplishing in a day what it would have taken weeks of work without us. I noticed something similar with our efficiency here. We were able to build the bench and plant the tree in a matter of hours, easily – something that would have taken them an entire day to do without the help of volunteers.

What made Trans Queer Pueblo particularly special to us was that they are a relatively new nonprofit. Due to this, no other service learning group from Wyoming had worked with them – giving us the opportunity to form a strong foundational relationship with them. We hope that this relationship will continue for many years to come, with future service learning groups going to Arizona.

Our last day was one long day, as we drove all the way back to Laramie. However, most (except for the participant with the hurt ankle) everyone was in good spirits. For the remainder of the trip, especially on that last day, my co-leaders demonstrated admirable patience and encouragement for the participant who was in a less than cheerful mood, due to her hurt ankle. We enjoyed talking, playing trivia and other games, and listening to music and podcasts. I was pleased with the way we finished our trip strong, in the sense of doing things as a group – all of us helped to clean our Airbnb in the morning, and all of us helped to clean out our van before we went home for the night.

When we were back in Laramie, and after the participants left, my co-leaders and I ended our Alternative Breaks trip with a group leader hug. I found this to be a perfect ending. It was a trip we embarked on together, and it was a trip we made successful together. We tied up the rest of the loose ends by going to the reorientation lunch a couple days later. This brought things to a nice close. It was rewarding to tell others about our experience, and to learn about theirs. I appreciated the opportunity to have a healthy discussion about both our specific trips, and Alternative Breaks in general.

As previously mentioned, I have travelled with Alternative Breaks before – this was my third time. However, each experience was unique, and impacted me in different ways. If I were to break the

trips down into the components of location, service, and group, I would rank Kanab as being the best service, Trinidad being the best location, and Arizona being the best group I travelled with. However, I am fortunate in the sense of having positive experiences each time I travelled with Alternative Breaks. Every time, the service, the location, the group, the accommodations, and the community have all been phenomenal.

One thing that was particularly unique about Arizona, compared to my previous trips, was my role of being a leader instead of being a participant. It proved to be an entirely different experience. As rewarding as it was, when I was a participant, I felt more like I was coasting along, jumping through hoops and completing the service. As previously indicated, I felt much more involved with the trip, and like I got more out of it than I did on previous trips.

As a leader, something I found myself constantly thinking about was what went well on our trip, and what I would change if I were to lead this trip or give recommendations to trip leaders for Arizona in the future. The Tucson leg of our trip was incredible. Our accommodations were spectacular – I would always want there to be a Tucson portion, using the same accommodations. Communication with the nonprofit organizations we worked with was significantly better than it was with the Phoenix nonprofits. Additionally, I think there is a lot more we could do and learn with the Tucson nonprofits, if we had more than a day to work with them. Considering the first part of our time in Phoenix, until the last day of service on our trip, I would have said to keep the entire service trip in Tucson for future Alternative Breaks trips. However, Trans Queer Pueblo was easily the best organization we worked with all week, in my opinion. They gave us such a healthy balance of education and service, and we were able to lay a strong foundational relationship with them. Working with them for just a few hours made me wish we had more time to work with them, and I know that future groups from Wyoming and Trans Queer Pueblo will both benefit greatly by interacting more in the future.

A particular aspect of this trip that I would change is the number of organizations we worked with. When I went to Kanab, we spent all week with the same nonprofit organization. We did the same in the Trinidad community. However, in Arizona, we worked with three entirely different organizations. Due to this, we were not able to form as intimate of connections with these nonprofits, which I believe jeopardizes our long-term relationship with them as a University. Instead of making that relationship stronger, we simply maintained. Although all the service we did truly was sensational, I would limit future trips to one organization in each location. I would recommend doing two days of service with Tucson Samaritans, and three days of service with Trans Queer Pueblo.

The best way to describe the Alternative Spring Break Trips I have gone on is through one word: transformational. Kanab and Trinidad have sincerely helped to shape who I am today. Arizona did so even more though – what better way to transform, grow, and learn about oneself other than to lead a trip of peers outside of the state to perform service? I could not have asked for a better team of co-leaders. We were remarkable at getting along, coordinating, and balancing all requests and preferences throughout the duration of the trip, and in the weeks preceding the trip. True, we had one bumpy portion of poor communication on Tuesday. However, we recovered quickly, and that was our only minor rough patch. Otherwise, we had an equitable distribution of responsibility – from handling paperwork to taking care of the group credit card, from taking turns driving our giant van in large cities, to fulfilling the leadership role and being the spokesperson for our group when working with nonprofits. Later in the week, when our participant hurt her ankle, the strength of our leadership showed through our flawless communication and execution of taking care of the unplanned situation.

Having a balanced team of leaders meant that we had a healthy balance of skills that each of us brought to the team. We were able to build off one another's strengths, and fill in the weaknesses with other strengths, making our group not just a successful group of leaders, but also a successful group of participants. We had great participants, but I believe that having good, cooperative leaders helped to

ease the group dynamic and make it successful as a whole. Within our leaders, we had two louder leaders who were more extroverted, and two quieter leaders who were more introverted. Yet, the louder leaders did not overshadow the quieter leaders, and the quieter leaders made it so that their voices were heard too. We each pulled equal weight. One particular leadership practice I found myself exemplifying during our service trip was the administrative duties – from completing the tracking expenses log daily, to filling out the incident report after our participant hurt her ankle, to preparing other various documents for our participants before the trip commenced (like the information packet and the participant agreement form).

Personal values help to define who someone is. Due to this, they have a significant role to play in someone's leadership. If I were to narrow my values down to just one, I would choose the value of family. This value certainly impacted my leadership throughout this experience. I found myself being more confident and comfortable in my leadership role once we had established a familial comradery amongst our group. Driving one vehicle helped to create this feeling initially, but I think the familial atmosphere was really created once we got to Tucson, and had a house instead of hotel, the ability to cook meals together, to make it a group effort to clean up, and to sit together at the table and play games or sit in the living room and have reflections about the day. I quickly learned that one of my top values as a leader is communication – whether between myself and my participants, between myself and my co-leaders, or between myself and the nonprofit organizations we worked with – having clear communication made everything work much more smoothly.

Being a leader for Alternative Breaks has given me the opportunity to evaluate my personal philosophy about service. First of all, I have been a volunteer of some form or another for a decade, because service plays an important role in my life. It always has, and it always will. There can be an incredibly selfish component to service – something I did not fully understand when I was younger. Too many times, people do service to be a good person, or do a good thing to feel better about themselves.

To me, however, service is so much more than that. For me, service is not about making myself feel better about myself. It is about making someone else feel better because they received the help they needed or wanted. Service is about helping someone else or another social justice issue I believe in. It is about bringing in different perspectives, different beliefs and opinions together to one issue, and having those differences work together towards a common goal.

My philosophy about service also revolves around learning. It is vitally important for people – particularly college students who are about to embark into the “real world”, and make a difference with their jobs, beliefs, and actions – to learn about the social justice issues around the globe. Having these focuses on the Alternative Breaks Trips for certain social justice issues helps facilitate that learning process. In Arizona, our focus was on immigration. Wyoming is not a border state, so we are not particularly grossly affected by immigration rights on a daily basis. Before this trip, I was aware of immigration issues, but I did not have a full appreciation for the intricacies of this issue, and how it impacts places like Arizona. It is so imperative to become educated on matters such as this, and to bring that information back to Wyoming with us – to spread the word, and to raise awareness.

Thanks to being a leader, I was able to refine another perspective of my personal philosophy of service, related to the chief educational component. It is too easy to go into a situation with pre-formed opinions about it. Media, family, religion, politics, and many other factors make our opinions about the world malleable. It makes people more close-minded, and unaware of all perspectives of an issue. There were multiple instances throughout the week that we were able to get a full 360° perspective on the issues we were talking about. As one of many examples, we got one side of immigration from the Tucson Samaritans, and a whole different side from Border Control. I certainly had pre-formed ideas and opinions about gender identity and fluidity before I had the opportunity to become more educated on the matter with Trans Queer Pueblo. This trip taught me how important it is to get a wholistic perspective about something, before forming concrete opinions about it.

The Alternative Spring Break trip to Arizona, as with all the trips offered through the SLCE department, was a service-learning trip; geared to providing service to a community affected by a certain social justice issue and learn the intricacies of how that focus impacts the community. I believe my co-leaders and I certainly accomplished this aspect of the trip. However, I also learned about myself, and the challenges that accompany planning a trip like this. There were a lot of details, communication, and coordination that occurred between myself and my co-leaders, between our Airbnb hosts, and between the nonprofit organizations we worked with. In a sense, my co-leaders and I developed a curriculum, guiding what we hoped our participants would gain from the trip.

Leading discussions and facilitating reflections started out a bit rocky, as predicted. A couple of our participants knew each other, but for the most part, we started the trip as strangers. It can be challenging to eek out meaningful reflections – or even discussions about what the participants wanted to do on the recreation day – when one is not entirely comfortable with the other individuals in the room. As always, I felt as if I could have used more reflection time. However, I appreciated the discussions we did have, particularly after our service days. Having developed a curriculum, or itinerary, and leading discussions has allowed me to develop an appreciation for leaders, of any sort. It makes me want to be a more active participant, when I am not the leader of a group. I find the reflections to be one of the most vital components of these trips. Designating time to think about what service we have done, what we have learned, and how we can make a difference really helps me to consolidate and process the trips as a whole. It helps me to discover weaknesses and strengths in my service and learning repertoire, and it helps me to morph my values and philosophy of service to better represent who I am and what I believe in.

Prior to leading an Alternative Breaks trip, I did not have a lot of experience as a leader. I had been a TA for anatomy lab, which is very different from being an Alternative Breaks leader. Being a TA helped me to lay a foundation of my leadership style and learn how to be a leader, but it did not give me

a lot of confidence in being able to lead a group of people who are my peers. It took leading an Alternative Breaks trip to become a confident leader, and a better leader of my peers. I am still a quiet leader; however, throughout a year, I have had the ability to learn what it takes to be an effective leader. I learned how to plan a trip for a large group, and what to do to make that group fluid and comfortable with one another. I learned how to handle adversity gracefully, how to make my voice stronger – if not a little louder – as a leader. Most importantly, my skills as a leader would not have developed without the help of my co-leaders. I learned what makes them good leaders, and how to apply that to my leadership. Teamwork is a vital element of Alternative Breaks. Thanks to my co-leaders, I learned how to effectively work together, as a team, to lead a group of our peers on a service-learning trip.

Overall, my experience of leading a group of my peers on a trip was a positive experience. Having to share that role with three other people was both a challenge (in the sense of finding my niche and voice in the group), and also a blessing (in the sense that I had three other wonderful women that I admire to share the responsibility with). We did have our struggles, from a diminished amount of communication on the day we worked with Iskashitaa, to having to spend an afternoon in a hospital. However, other than that, I sincerely believe we worked very well together as leaders. We each brought different, complimentary strengths to the group. Honestly, despite having a couple bumps here and there, I would not change a thing about the trip. I obviously do not want a participant to get hurt, or for there to be tension between the leaders; but these challenges allowed us to learn and figure out how to be more effective leaders.

Alternative Breaks through the SLCE program at the University of Wyoming is a wonderful program. It is incredibly impactful, involving travelling to see the world, providing nothing less than sensational service to various communities, and undergoing self-transformation. In the past four years, it is easily one of the best things I became involved with during my undergraduate career. Alternative

Breaks changed my life, it made me more aware, and revitalized the importance of service in my life. I am taking my experience with SLCE one step further this summer. I will be completing a five-week ethical service project with a group called Quest Overseas in Kigali, Rwanda. There, I will be helping with building construction of a dormitory for some of the boys who were left without a home after the genocide that took place there. Alternative Breaks is my number one thing to come out of college. It is something I would recommend for anyone to partake in – participant or leader – and has taught me skills I aspire to continue to use as I further my education and career.