



February 23, 2010

MEMORANDUM

To: Corporation State Offices
From: Paul Davis, Acting Director, AmeriCorps VISTA
Subject: Guidance for Alternative Break & Similar Programs

Alternative Break (AB) programs¹ can be an effective way to channel the efforts of highly talented and motivated university students to communities in desperate need of assistance. This memo provides guidance for VISTA project development with respect to AB programming to ensure conformance with the VISTA program's statutory purpose, legal framework and programming principles. This guidance is applicable to other similar programs that, like AB programs, immerse volunteers on an episodic basis for short term community service projects.

The following principals shall be applied to all AB efforts.

Sustainability:

- a. The target community is identified in the project application.
- b. Project beneficiaries are involved in the planning, development and implementation of the project.
- c. Either the university or the low-income community local to the university have an ongoing relationship with either the AB program or the AB target community; the relationship is maintained after the VISTAs' departure.
- d. Target community selection is prioritized as follows:
 - i. Communities local (i.e., in the same community or city) to the University
 - ii. Communities in the same state or region as the University
 - iii. Communities outside the state or region of the University
- e. The AB volunteer efforts are part of a comprehensive program in the AB target community, similar to the principles AmeriCorps NCCC applies to its spikes and VISTA applies to Summer Associate projects.
- f. The University has a plan to continue the AB program once the VISTA has developed the capacity of the university to maintain the program.
- g. The VISTA is establishing an on-going AB volunteer generation program.
- h. The VISTA is not the individual primarily responsible for the project. (If s/he were the sole person, s/he would essentially be replacing or supplanting full-time university staff).

Poverty Reduction/Alleviation:

- a. The AB target community is in the United States and is low income/underserved.
- b. Results are reported to demonstrate long-lasting positive effects in reducing/alleviating poverty.

VISTAs may be permitted to go on Alternative Spring Break if they:

- a. Are influential in setting up the program, as described by their VISTA Assignment Description.
- b. Have permission from their direct supervisor and check in at least once during the event.
- c. Have permission from their State Office which is obtained at least one month prior to the departure of the member.
- d. Will be documenting significant aspects of the trip for sustainability (i.e. the relationship/partnership between the service organization and the host site), noting what went well and what could be improved (and how) and listing what outcomes were achieved.
- e. Are accompanied by a University staff member. A VISTA may never act as a chaperone.

Logistics:

- a. Supervision on AB project is by the University staff member.
- b. University and/or student volunteers assume all liabilities.
- c. The services activities will not endanger the safety of the VISTA.
- d. VISTA travel, including emergency travel if injured on-site, and lodging is university's responsibility. Appropriate housing, supervision and other supports must be available to the VISTA.

ⁱ Alternative Break programs, like other episodic immersion programs, place volunteers in communities to engage in community service projects for a short, pre-defined period of time. Alternative Break programs typically place teams of college or high school students in communities to engage in community service and experiential learning during their summer, fall, winter, weekend or spring breaks. Students perform short term projects for community agencies, commonly traveling to communities outside their own.

Most often, the objectives of an alternative break program are to involve students in community-based service projects and to give students opportunities to learn about the problems faced by members of communities with whom they otherwise may have had little or no direct contact. By being completely immersed into diverse environments, Alternative Break programs believe that participants will experience, discuss, and understand social issues in a significant way. Such programs further hope that the intensity of the experience will increase the likelihood that participants will transfer the lessons learned on-site back to their own communities even after the alternative break ends.

Examples of Alternative Break trips are:

- Tutoring migrant farm workers in Florida
- Building homes in Appalachia
- Working with the homeless in Washington, DC.