

2016

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Stephanie Hayne Beatty

Ken N. Meadows

*Western University*, [kmeadow2@uwo.ca](mailto:kmeadow2@uwo.ca)

Richard SwamiNathan

Catherine Mulvihill

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## Citation of this paper:

Beatty, Stephanie Hayne; Meadows, Ken N.; SwamiNathan, Richard; and Mulvihill, Catherine, "The Effects of an Alternative Spring Break Program on Student Development" (2016). *Centre for Teaching and Learning Publications*. 14.  
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ctlpub/14>

# **The Effects of an Alternative Spring Break Program on Student Development**

Stephanie Hayne Beatty, Ken N. Meadows,  
Richard SwamiNathan, and Catherine Mulvihill

## **Abstract**

This study examined the potential impact of a week-long cocurricular community service-learning (CSL) program on undergraduate students' psychosocial development. Participants in the Alternative Spring Break program and a matched control group completed surveys assessing a number of psychosocial variables immediately before and after the program, as well as 8 months later. Findings suggest that cocurricular CSL programs such as alternative breaks may positively impact students in 2 important ways: increasing personal growth and increasing personal effectiveness. Further research with larger samples is necessary; however, results from this study indicate that cocurricular CSL can be a powerful tool for supporting positive student development.

## **Introduction**

The past two decades have seen increasing emphasis on experiential learning in higher education as a way of bringing learning to life and providing students with professional work experience that will help them build skills for the future. Work-integrated learning programs (internship, co-op, practicum) have long been hailed as critical to students' successful entry into the workforce. More recently, community service-learning (CSL) programs have proliferated on college and university campuses as an effective method to improve student learning and produce tangible benefit for communities. Research on curricular (credit-bearing) CSL has demonstrated that students can achieve improved academic outcomes (linking theory with practice) as well as significant personal outcomes (e.g., self-confidence, commitment to service). Although some research exists on the effects of community service/volunteering (e.g., *Astin & Sax, 1998; Avolos, Sax, & Astin, 1999*), there is very little research on the effects of cocurricular CSL (*Keen & Hall, 2009*). We contend that cocurricular CSL can be differentiated from community service by its prioritization of intentional reflection. Although community service and cocurricular CSL activities both take place outside the classroom and are non-credit-bearing, practitioners who build

programs with structural elements similar to CSL courses (e.g., community partnership building, student orientation, reflection) have used the label *cocurricular CSL* to distinguish these programs from unstructured volunteer programs.

With this study, we sought to contribute to the CSL literature by addressing the paucity of research on cocurricular CSL as well as the limitations evident in much of the research on alternative break programs, including its primarily qualitative nature and the lack of longitudinal data. To address these issues, we employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the longer term impact of a cocurricular alternative break program on participants' personal development relative to a matched control group of students who were actively volunteering but were not participating in the alternative break program.

## Review of the Literature

Although the community college system has long been infused with opportunities for practical experience, 4-year colleges and universities have recently placed additional emphasis on providing experiential learning opportunities in undergraduate degree programs (Eyler, 2009; Warren, 2012). This emphasis is, in part, a response to the call for such institutions to provide an education that has more obvious practical utility for its graduates (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002; DiConti, 2004; Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities, 2012). Eyler (2009) contended that experiential learning programs link academic content with meaningful work and volunteer experiences, reinforce classroom learning, and advance students' capacity for critical thinking. Additionally, in an effort to produce socially responsible graduates who contribute meaningfully to social change (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Bringle, Studer, Wilson, Clayton, & Steinberg, 2011; Chambers, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2004; McCarthy & Tucker, 2002; Ramaley, 2014), universities are embracing opportunities to connect students' academic learning with community projects. Community service-learning (CSL) has emerged as an effective pedagogy that addresses this dual emphasis on experiential learning and social responsibility, and it has been integrated into U.S. campus missions as a critical step toward institutionalization (Furco, 2001; Holland, 1997; Stanton, 2008; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

For Canadian institutions, the focus on CSL may be more directly connected to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a survey of undergraduate student participation in activi-

ties inside and outside the classroom. Canadian institutions have historically scored lower than their U.S. counterparts on variables including *active and collaborative learning* and *enriching educational experiences* (Conway, Zhao, & Montgomery, 2011). CSL activities may have direct implications for improving scores in these areas. Further, CSL was identified by Kuh (2008) as a high-impact educational experience that increases rates of retention, improves student engagement, and contributes to students' development of personal and social responsibility.

Given the relevance of CSL for student engagement in higher education, the significant debate in the literature about the definition of CSL must be noted. There is considerable discussion regarding whether this definition should include activities outside formal credit-bearing courses (i.e., cocurricular activities) or whether "true" CSL must occur within the context of an academic course (i.e., CSL is limited to curricular activities; Furco, 1996; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, & Zlotkowski, 2000). The distinction between cocurricular and curricular CSL is important as each can contribute to different outcomes for student development. Curricular CSL has been associated with cognitive learning outcomes (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993) whereas cocurricular CSL is often linked to aspects of personal development such as identity exploration and social responsibility (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). In this ongoing debate, our views acknowledge the value of cocurricular service activities that include both specific learning goals and an intentional reflective component and align with Eyler and Giles (1999; see also Jacoby, 1996); we argue that it is important to acknowledge the significant personal growth students can experience through out-of-classroom involvements.

As discussed earlier, the debate in the literature about the exact nature of CSL has emphasized curricular forms of CSL. A similar focus is found throughout CSL research. A preponderance of the literature addresses the impact of curricular CSL (e.g., courses with a community placement, community-based research projects) on students' academic and personal development. For example, students in CSL courses report greater understanding of community problems (Astin & Sax, 1998; Borden, 2007; Markus et al., 1993), increases in the belief they can make a difference in the community (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Ericson, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Simons & Cleary, 2005), greater commitment to future community service (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus et al., 1993; McCarthy & Tucker, 2002; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002; Porter & Monard, 2001), and plans to become involved

in service-related careers (Markus et al., 1993; Simons & Cleary, 2005; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). However, the research shows mixed results concerning the impact of curricular CSL on students' academic learning. Some studies demonstrate the positive contributions to students' understanding of course material (Astin et al., 2000; Berson & Younkin, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus et al., 1993; Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007; Warren, 2012), but others show no difference between CSL courses and traditional courses (Kendrick, 1996; Miller, 1994; Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998).

In our study, we placed emphasis on the impact of CSL on students' personal development. The studies cited here align with the position taken in our research. Eyler and Giles' (1999) seminal study used a quasi-experimental design to survey 1,500 students (1,100 in service-learning courses and 400 in traditional courses) from 20 U.S. colleges and universities. Results from the pre- and post-semester surveys showed the positive effect of CSL on several outcomes including personal development, social responsibility, interpersonal skills, and tolerance and stereotyping. Another quasi-experimental study of undergraduates enrolled in multiple CSL courses across different faculties found that students who participated in CSL showed positive changes in self-rated civic attitudes and plans to be involved in civic activities postgraduation compared with those who did not participate in CSL (Moely et al., 2002). Research conducted by Markus et al. (1993) randomly selected two of eight sections of an American politics course to include CSL. Results from the pre- and post-course surveys indicated significant increases in CSL students' intentions to participate in future community service and in pursuing a helping-related career.

The considerable research on the effects of curricular CSL has contributed little to the understanding of the effects of cocurricular CSL (e.g., days of service, participation in service-based campus clubs, alternative breaks). Specifically, there has been limited examination of the effects of cocurricular CSL on student development. In our review of the literature, the work of Keen and Hall (2009) represents the sole instance of a study on the impacts of cocurricular CSL. In this longitudinal study, researchers surveyed two cohorts of students at 23 institutions who participated in the same structured cocurricular CSL program. Surveys were administered in students' freshman, junior, and graduating years. Participants completed at least 10 hours of service and reflection every week for 4 years, as well as two or three longer term service experiences, often in international settings. By graduation, each student had participated in a minimum of 1,680 hours of CSL. Study results

revealed that between their freshman and senior years, students experienced significant increases in the value they assigned to doing community service, working for social justice, and the development of intercultural skills. Researchers were able to isolate cocurricular service-learning as the variable that contributed to the study's positive outcomes.

## **Research on Alternative Spring Breaks**

Within the last decade, the CSL literature has included studies about the potential impact on students of alternative breaks, or organized, team-based community-service projects during a college or university's annual spring break period (e.g., *Niehaus & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2015; Piacitelli, Barwick, Doerr, Porter, & Sumka, 2013*). Moreover, Bowen's (2011) qualitative study of five cocurricular alternative breaks at one institution included data from participants' oral and written reflections. His analysis showed positive outcomes for students' sense of accomplishment, sensitivity to social issues, and commitment to community. Boyle-Baise and Langford (2004) conducted a qualitative study of eight students enrolled in a CSL course with an alternative break component. From the data collected through interviews, participant observations, and document reviews, the researchers found the alternative break experience had three positive outcomes for participants: (a) students had a chance to learn from the lived experiences of their peers; (b) they increased their awareness of the realities of poverty in their community; and (c) in some cases, participants increased their motivation to continue serving. Boyle-Baise and Langford also discussed several improvements they would make to the course, including the addition of structured team-building exercises and a focus on community capacity in reflective discussions. Jones, Robbins, and LePeau (2012) built on Kiely's (2004, 2005a) work on transformative learning by considering students' experiences in four week-long immersion programs. The authors used a multisite case study approach to identify which elements of the program (e.g., getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing the issues) impacted how students were able to make meaning from their experiences. Although each of these studies offers important insights related to the structure and value of alternative breaks, they are all qualitative designs, some with small sample sizes, and thus not necessarily generalizable to alternative break participants overall.

Armstrong (2006) conducted a quantitative study that utilized a pretest/posttest design with a control group to determine

whether students in different models of CSL would experience unique outcomes. He explored the psychosocial development outcomes of CSL by comparing three different models: (a) semester-long curricular CSL, (b) semester-long cocurricular CSL, and (c) a 1-week alternative break. He discovered students in the alternative break program had the most developmental differences, specifically related to developing autonomy and maturing interpersonal relationships.

### **Rationale for the Current Study**

The current study was designed in response to the scarcity of research on cocurricular CSL and addresses the limitations of some of the existing studies on alternative break programs, as previously discussed. We conducted a quasi-experimental study of a short-term cocurricular alternative break program, designed to consider the impact of the program on students' personal development. The quantitative design, which involved using a control group and surveying students at three distinct points throughout the experience, allowed us to identify specific personal development outcomes for participants versus nonparticipants and to consider potential longer term effects of alternative break participation. Avalos et al.'s (1999) seminal study on the long-term effects of volunteerism during the undergraduate years found that service participation had lasting impacts on students' level of social responsibility, commitment to community service, self-empowerment, and commitment to further education. Does involvement in an alternative break program have similar effects?

The program under investigation, the Alternative Spring Break (ASB) program, involves the short-term immersion of participating students in a cocurricular CSL experience. ASB students serve approximately 40 hours over a 1-week period in a variety of locations in North and South America. In each area, students lived within the host community and served with nonprofit agencies and nongovernmental organizations to build homes, teach English, support seniors and First Nations programs, offer medical clinics, and/or provide emergency food and shelter. Teams were facilitated by faculty and staff leaders who helped prepare students for their experiences during five 3-hour predeparture workshops that included topics such as community development, power and privilege, cultural humility, and transformative learning.

The ASB program, like many CSL programs, is grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, using it as a framework

for experiential learning activities that focus on both action and reflection. Students are active participants in service experiences (e.g., building a house or teaching English), spend time engaging in critical reflection about their experiences, link these experiences to discipline-specific learning, and integrate their learning into future experiences. Through daily facilitated reflection that included personal journaling, group discussions, and interactive games, team leaders supported students' development of a greater awareness of social issues, helped them think critically about their beliefs and values, and encouraged them to make connections between the CSL experience and in-classroom learning from their individual disciplines. The goals of the ASB program are threefold: (a) develop mutually beneficial partnerships between participating students and local and global community organizations, (b) inspire active participation in the community and increase students' civic engagement, and (c) support students' academic success and career development. The program is marketed to students as a CSL experience with emphasis on the opportunity to contribute to meaningful community projects in global settings. With the tagline "Be the Change," the program tends to attract students interested in community development, social justice, and intercultural learning.

## Research Question

In response to the gaps in the existing literature, we asked: If students engaged in curricular CSL identify significant personal development outcomes including an increased sense of civic engagement, to what extent can similar outcomes be facilitated by cocurricular programs? Jacoby (1996) argued that although curricular CSL has the inherent benefit of instructors making direct links between course content and community service experiences, significant opportunities for student learning and development can also occur outside the traditional classroom environment. The current study adds to the limited body of research on the transformative effects of cocurricular CSL (Armstrong, 2006; Bowen, 2011; Keen & Hall, 2009) by investigating the impact of an ASB program on nine outcomes: attitudes toward community service, personal growth, personal development, personal effectiveness, beliefs and values, constructive personal behavior in groups, career plans, and community problem identification.

Consistent with existing research, we expected to see positive changes to ASB participants' personal growth, personal development, personal effectiveness, and personal behavior in groups when compared with nonparticipants. Because the ASB program



is designed to immerse participants in a different culture/community, we also hypothesized they would report an increase in their ability to identify community problems. Finally, because of the intensity of the program and previous participants' reporting anecdotal changes in attitudes around community service, we predicted an increase in these attitudes, as well as preference for a service-oriented career.

Although there is evidence to suggest that CSL contributes to students' personal development in the short term (*Astin et al., 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus et al., 1993; Miller, 1994*), less research has examined the enduring influence of CSL (*Jones & Abes, 2004*; for a recent study on the long-term impact of CSL, see *Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015*). Data for the current study were collected in a pre-ASB survey, a post-ASB survey, and an 8-month follow-up survey in order to determine any longer term impacts of CSL involvement. For example, are ASB participants more likely than nonparticipants to be engaged in community service and/or volunteer work once they are separated from their teammates and distanced from the communities in which they served? We chose to conduct the follow-up survey after 8 months to allow students returning to the university a full semester back in school after the summer break before assessing the long-term impact of the program; it was our hypothesis that returning to a regular schedule of school, work, and extracurricular activities would give a more accurate picture of whether students were able to realize their intentions for engagement. Finally, in order to isolate cocurricular CSL as the variable that contributes to students' personal development, we matched ASB participants with nonparticipants who were engaged in volunteering activity. We wanted to determine whether the ASB program had an impact on participants above and beyond that of non-ASB volunteer experiences.

## Method

### Participants

The participants of our study were students enrolled at a large research-intensive Canadian university. The project received approval from the Institutional Review Board. To assess the potential impact of ASB on student development, all 171 students participating in the ASB program and 6,000 randomly selected undergraduates were invited by e-mail to complete three online surveys in January, March, and November of their ASB year (henceforth

referred to as the pre-ASB, post-ASB, and follow-up surveys, respectively). For the three surveys, there were 628, 492, and 364 respondents, representing 10%, 8%, and 6%, respectively, of the 6,171 students invited to participate.

We intended to match ASB and non-ASB participants who had completed all three surveys. Unfortunately, insufficient numbers of ASB participants completed all three to conduct this matching. Thus, only those 30 ASB participants who had completed both the pre-ASB and post-ASB surveys were matched with non-ASB counterparts according to gender, program year, enrollment status (all were full-time), and faculty of enrollment. Similarly, all of the 43 ASB students who completed the third survey were matched with a non-ASB participant on these variables.

**Table 1. Demographic Information for Matched ASB- and Non-ASB Respondents to the Three Surveys**

Demographic Variables		Pre and Post Surveys		Follow-Up Survey	
		ASB	Non-ASB	ASB	Non-ASB
Gender					
	Male	3	3	8	8
	Female	27	27	35	35
Year of Study					
	First	7	7	1	1
	Second	13	13	7	7
	Third	7	7	21	21
	Fourth	3	3	14	14
Enrollment Status					
	Full-time	30	30	43	43
	Part-time	0	0	0	0
Faculty					
	Arts and Humanities	2	2	2	2
	Engineering	0	0	2	0
	Health Sciences	9	8	14	15
	Information and Media Studies	1	1	0	0
	Medicine & Dentistry	3	0	9	4
	Sciences	8	11	7	14
	Social Science	7	8	9	8

Sixty participants (30 ASB and 30 non-ASB) who had completed both the pre- and post-ASB surveys were compared on the

variables of interest, as were the 86 participants (43 ASB and 43 non-ASB) who completed the follow-up survey. The demographic distribution of the participants is outlined in Table 1. It was not possible to match all participants on faculty of enrollment, so faculty-based substitutions were made (e.g., one health science student was matched with a social science student, three medical sciences students were matched with science students).

## Measures

**Demographic variables.** All three surveys included items assessing participants' gender, age, year of program, enrollment status, faculty of registration, and whether they had volunteered in the last 12 months. To keep the surveys short, we did not ask questions about the nature of the volunteering (e.g., with what organization).

**Positive attitude toward community service.** Participants completed 11 items from the Ability, Actions, Awareness, Benefits, and Connectedness subscales of the Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS; *Shiarella, McCarthy, & Tucker, 2000*). Participants rated their agreement with these items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*) to determine their attitudes toward community service (e.g., "I am responsible for doing something about improving the community," "There are people in the community who need help"). A principal components analysis (PCA) revealed one component, which we labeled *positive attitude toward community service*, and which had a Cronbach's alpha of .91. Only the results of the PCA components and Cronbach's alphas from the first survey are reported. The results of these analyses for Surveys 2 and 3 are nearly identical in almost every case.

**Personal growth through community service.** The Personal Growth through Community Service subscale of the Serving Country and Community Survey (SCCS; *Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS], 2004*) assesses the extent to which participants perceive they have grown personally because of their volunteer experience in the last year (e.g., "I re-examined my beliefs and attitudes about myself," "I was exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world"). Participants rated their agreement with the five items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*). A PCA confirmed one component, *personal growth through community service*, which had a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

**Personal development.** Selected items from the Post-Experience Survey of Service Learning (*Gaudet, 2007*) were used to

examine participants' personal development on a number of characteristics. Participants rated their current level (1 = *Low* to 5 = *High*) on eight items. A PCA revealed two components, which we labeled *desire to help* (four items; e.g., "Your desire to help others," "Your desire to make the world a better place") and *personal competence* (four items, e.g., "Your self-confidence," "Your ability to effectively lead a group of people"), which had Cronbach's alphas of .83 and .67, respectively.

**Personal effectiveness through community service.** Participants completed three items from the Personal Effectiveness Through Community Services scale of the SCCS (CNCS, 2004) to assess the extent to which participants perceived they had an impact through their volunteer community service (e.g., "I felt like I made a contribution to the community," "I felt like I could make a difference in the life of at least one person"). Participants rated their agreement with these items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*). A PCA confirmed one component, *personal effectiveness through community service*, which had a Cronbach's alpha of .75.

**Beliefs and values about service.** Participants completed the six items from the Beliefs and Values Measure developed by Markus et al. (1993). These items assess the extent to which participants hold positive beliefs and values about service (e.g., "At some point in the future I would like to work with disadvantaged groups," "I can make a difference in the world"). Participants rated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*). A PCA revealed one component, *beliefs and values about service*, which had a Cronbach's alpha of .72.

**Positive behavior in groups.** Participants also completed the five items of the Constructive Personal Behavior in Groups scale from the SCCS (CNCS, 2004). To determine how frequently they engaged in constructive personal behaviors (e.g., "I try to present my ideas without criticizing the ideas of others," "I help find solutions when unexpected problems arise"), participants rated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*). A PCA confirmed one component, *personal behavior in groups*, which had a Cronbach's alpha of .70.

**Importance of a service-oriented career.** Participants completed the three items from the Importance of Service-Oriented Careers scale of the SCCS (CNCS, 2004). To determine the importance of a service-oriented job for participants (e.g., "Working in a job to correct social and economic inequalities," "Working in a

job where I am of direct service to the community"), they rated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not important at all* to 5 = *Very important*). A PCA confirmed one component, *importance of a service-oriented career*, which had a Cronbach's alpha of .74.

**Community problem identification.** Respondents who participated in the ASB program completed a revised version of the Community Problem Identification Measure from the SCCS (CNCS, 2004). This version asked respondents to indicate how much they knew about seven problems their ASB community may face (e.g., "the environment," "poverty") on a 5-point scale (1 = *Nothing* to 5 = *A great deal*). A PCA revealed one component that we labeled *community problem identification*, which had a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

## Procedure

Students who participated in the ASB program, along with a randomly selected group of students who did not participate in the program, were invited via e-mail to participate in the three online surveys in January, March, and November of that year. Submission of the survey was taken to indicate consent to participate. For each survey, participants had the option to enter a drawing for a \$200 gift certificate for a chain of shopping malls. Close to 100% of the participants opted to participate in the drawing.

## Data Analysis

To examine possible interactions between ASB participation and the timing of the survey administration (i.e., pre- versus post-program survey), a series of 2 (ASB participation; ASB, Non-ASB)  $\times$  2 (Timing; preprogram survey, postprogram survey) split-plot analyses of variance were performed. For this analysis, ASB participation was the *between participants* variable, and timing was the *within participants* variable. There were no significant main effects for timing, so those analyses are not reported below. A series of independent *t*-tests were also performed to examine ASB participation differences on the 8-month follow-up survey.

A Bonferroni correction was used to control for inflation of Type I error due to multiple comparisons for both sets of analyses. This resulted in employing a conservative standard of significance ( $p < .006$ ). A number of findings did not reach this standard, although they did meet the noncorrected standard of  $p < .05$ . We report the findings that met the noncorrected but not the corrected

standard as trends in order to shine light on areas that warrant further investigation.

## Results

The findings examining the relationship between ASB participation and psychosocial development are presented below. We report the effects of ASB participation on each psychosocial component discussed previously by comparing pre- and post-ASB surveys (see Table 2). Additionally, the 8-month follow-up surveys helped us identify longer term effects of ASB participation (see Table 3).

### Positive Attitude Toward Community Service

There was a significant main effect for ASB participation,  $F(1,58) = 8.74, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .13$ , on the pre- and post-ASB surveys for positive attitude toward community service, but no comparable effect on the follow-up survey was found,  $t(84) = .60, ns$ . ASB participants reported a more positive attitude toward community service overall than their non-ASB counterparts, but that difference was not evident on the follow-up survey.

### Personal Growth Through Community Service

A significant interaction was found for personal growth through community service,  $F(1,41) = 11.71, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$ . Post hoc analyses (i.e., Tukey's HSD) revealed that ASB participants were significantly higher on personal growth on the post-rather than the pre-program survey ( $p < .001$ ), whereas there was no significant difference for their non-ASB counterparts. For the follow-up survey, a significant ASB participation effect was evident for personal growth,  $t(70) = 3.11, p = .003, d = .74$ , such that ASB participants were significantly higher on personal growth than their non-ASB counterparts.

### Personal Development

**Desire to help.** There was a significant main effect for ASB participation for desire to help on the pre- and post-surveys,  $F(1,57) = 27.47, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$ . There was also a significant main effect on the follow-up survey,  $t(74) = 3.05, p = .003, d = .66$ . ASB students reported wanting to help others more than their non-ASB counterparts did, regardless of the timing of the survey.

There was a trend evident in the interaction for desire to help,  $F(1,57) = 6.03, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .10$ . The ASB participants' desire to

help was higher after the program than before ( $p = .04$ ), but there was no corresponding difference pre- to post-program for the non-ASB students.

**Personal competence.** There were no significant differences for personal competence for any of the three surveys, but there was a trend. ASB participants tended to be higher on personal competence than non-ASB participants on the pre- and post-program surveys,  $F(1,56) = 4.29$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ . There was no corresponding trend on the follow-up survey,  $t(83) = .85$ , *ns*.

## Personal Effectiveness Through Community Service

A significant interaction between ASB participation and timing was found for personal effectiveness through community service,  $F(1,41) = 10.84$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .21$ . ASB participants scored significantly higher on personal effectiveness on the post-ASB survey than pre-ASB survey ( $p < .001$ ), whereas there was no significant difference for their non-ASB counterparts. This difference in personal effectiveness was not evident on the follow-up survey,  $t(70) = 1.93$ , *ns*.

## Beliefs and Values About Service

There was a significant main effect for ASB participation for beliefs and values about service for the pre- and post-ASB surveys,  $F(1,57) = 27.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .33$ , as well as for the follow-up survey,  $t(84) = 3.00$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .64$ . Regardless of the timing of the surveys, ASB students had significantly more positive beliefs and values about service than their non-ASB counterparts.

There was a trend evident in the interaction for beliefs and values about service,  $F(1,57) = 5.28$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ . The ASB participants' beliefs and values about service were more positive after the program than before ( $p = .04$ ), but there was no corresponding difference pre- to post-program for the non-ASB students.

Table 2. Means (and Standard Deviations) for ASB and Non-ASB Participants on the Pre- and Post-ASB Surveys and Overall

	Pre-ASB		Post-ASB		Overall <sup>a</sup>	
	ASB	Non-ASB	ASB	Non-ASB	ASB	Non-ASB
Positive attitude	4.50 (.774)	4.23 (.557)	4.51 (.693)	3.98 (.628)	4.51 (.531) <sup>*</sup>	4.10 (.531) <sup>*</sup>
Personal growth	3.78 (.856)	3.53 (.923)	4.54 (.541) <sup>*</sup>	3.52 (.640) <sup>**</sup>	4.16 (.655)	3.53 (.658)
Desire to help	4.28 (.544)	3.59 (.833)	4.52 (.517) <sup>†</sup>	3.44 (.896) <sup>†</sup>	4.40 (.646) <sup>*</sup>	3.52 (.646) <sup>**</sup>
Personal competence	3.65 (.841)	3.34 (.805)	3.86 (.646)	3.45 (.673)	3.75 (.668) <sup>†</sup>	3.39 (.668) <sup>†</sup>
Personal effectiveness	4.08 (.765)	4.02 (.542)	4.61 (.369) <sup>*</sup>	3.85 (.639) <sup>*</sup>	4.35 (.490)	3.94 (.488)
Positive beliefs toward service	4.02 (.556)	3.44 (.595)	4.21 (.508)	3.33 (.694)	4.11 (.531) <sup>*</sup>	3.38 (.533) <sup>**</sup>
Personal behavior in groups	4.09 (.495)	3.86 (.707)	4.06 (.554)	3.85 (.599)	4.07 (.520)	3.86 (.517)
Service-oriented career	4.08 (.751)	3.80 (.928)	4.19 (.641) <sup>†</sup>	3.52 (.829) <sup>†</sup>	4.13 (.723) <sup>†</sup>	3.66 (.722) <sup>†</sup>
Community problem identification <sup>b</sup>	3.29 (.768) <sup>*</sup>	--	3.77 (.532) <sup>*</sup>	--	--	--

Note: <sup>a</sup>Overall column represents the main effect for ASB participation on the dependent variables, the effect of ASB participation averaged across the levels of timing (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1990).

<sup>b</sup>Only ASB participants completed the community problem identification measure.

<sup>\*</sup> $p < .001$ . <sup>†</sup> $p < .05$  (indicates a trend outside of established significance level for this study).



## Personal Behavior in Groups and Importance of a Service-Oriented Career

Although there were no significant differences for constructive personal behavior or importance of a service-oriented career on any of the three surveys, a trend was evident in the interaction for importance of a service-oriented career,  $F(1,57) = 5.51$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ . Interestingly, for non-ASB participants, a service-oriented career tended to be more important before the program took place than after ( $p = .02$ ), but there was no corresponding tendency pre- to post-program for the ASB students. There was also a trend on the follow-up survey such that ASB participants rated the importance of a service-oriented career higher than their non-ASB counterparts,  $t(83) = 2.63$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .57$ .

**Table 3. Means (and Standard Deviations) for ASB and Non-ASB Participants on the Follow-Up Survey**

	Follow-Up	
	ASB	Non-ASB
Positive attitude	4.42 (.710)	4.33 (.706)
Personal growth	4.08 (.811) <sup>*</sup>	3.45 (.891) <sup>*</sup>
Desire to help	4.29 (.617) <sup>*</sup>	3.77 (.924) <sup>*</sup>
Personal competence	3.80 (.697)	3.65 (.830)
Personal effectiveness	4.33 (.695)	3.98 (.865)
Positive beliefs toward service	3.97 (.663)	3.50 (.806) <sup>*</sup>
Positive behavior in groups	4.13 (.663)	3.89 (.806)
Service-oriented career	4.08 (.845) <sup>†</sup>	3.52 (1.09) <sup>†</sup>
Community problem identification <sup>a</sup>	3.55 (.543)	--

Note. <sup>a</sup> Only ASB participants completed the community problem identification measure. <sup>\*</sup> $p < .006$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ . <sup>†</sup> $p < .05$  (indicates a trend outside of established significance level for this study).

## Community Problem Identification

In their self-rated knowledge of the problems associated with their ASB location, ASB students showed a significant difference from the pre- to the post-ASB surveys,  $t(26) = -3.07$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $d = .73$ . After the completion of the ASB program, participants indicated that they had a significantly better understanding of the social issues facing their ASB community than they had prior to going to that community.

## Discussion

The research produced two important findings: ASB participants demonstrated both increased personal growth and increased personal effectiveness through their cocurricular CSL experience when compared with students who had not participated in the program but had done volunteering in another capacity. These findings will be discussed below in greater detail.

### Personal Growth and Effectiveness

Following the program, ASB participants reported exposure to new ideas and ways of seeing the world as well as changes in their belief that they can make a difference in the world. These results are consistent with Armstrong's (2006) research on developmental outcomes of CSL students and Rhoads's (1997) findings that CSL helps to foster an "ethic of caring." Rhoads suggested that CSL experiences involve an encounter between the self and the other, and one of the greatest benefits of this encounter is the development of a caring self. Our research suggests that ASB participants experience this kind of personal growth after encountering difference. ASB participants also reported feeling like part of a community and expressed confidence they could make a difference in the lives of others. This sense of personal efficacy through participation in CSL is also consistent with previous research (e.g., *Astin et al., 2000; Ericson, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Simons & Cleary, 2005*).

Increases to participants' personal growth and effectiveness may be connected to the intensive nature of the ASB program, where students reside in host communities and experience a variety of cultural customs including speaking the language, partaking of food, and participating in traditional ceremonies. The duration of international service programs has been addressed by previous research (*Camacho 2004; Kiely, 2005a*). *Kiely (2005b)* suggested that the intensity and duration of the immersive experience impacts the persistence of students' transformational learning; however, despite the short-term nature of the program, ASB participants do experience a considerable degree of immersion. Students are removed from their home environment and encouraged to participate in their new community in a way that is free from typical distractions (e.g., cell phones, internet). Immersive CSL experiences such as the ASB program can help students develop a greater understanding of self and community (*Kiely, 2004; Rhoads & Neururer, 1998*).

Development in these areas may also be linked to the structured reflection that is a hallmark of all CSL programs, whether

curricular or cocurricular. Research shows that in the delivery of effective CSL, the amount and type of reflection are critical factors (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Billig, 2009; Eyster, 2002; Eyster & Giles, 1999). Reflection enables participants to question their existing attitudes, behaviors, and assumptions in a supportive environment. ASB participants engage in daily reflective activities including journaling, peer discussions, and dialogues with community partners. These activities are facilitated by trained university faculty and staff leaders. Although the control group of non-ASB participants had engaged in some kind of volunteer experience, it was not clear whether this experience was immersive in nature or accompanied by intentional reflection to help the student process his or her experience. Future research could determine the length and depth of students' alternative volunteer experiences and allow for greater comparison between the two groups.

At the time of the 8-month follow-up survey, differences in personal effectiveness across the two groups were no longer observed. Immediately following a short-term immersive program, participants may feel confident in their capacity to make meaningful contributions to community change. However, as participants become more entrenched in their daily routines and further removed from the ASB experience, their level of perceived self-efficacy may decline. Alternatively, participants often comment anecdotally on the difficulties associated with putting their ideas into action when they return from their ASB experience. Although they may leave their host community with good intentions about their continued engagement with a particular social issue, they often lack the time, resources, or support to follow through on these plans when they return to school. This is consistent with what Kiely (2004) called the "chameleon complex": CSL students return from an experience and struggle to take action that is reflective of their shifts in worldview.

Though a slight decrease in the absolute value of their personal growth ratings was noticeable on the follow-up survey, ASB participants continued to report higher levels than non-ASB participants on all three surveys, which suggests a potential lasting effect to the personal growth experienced by ASB participants. This finding is consistent with research by Jones and Abes (2004), who found an enduring influence of CSL on participants' identity development and self-authorship 2 to 4 years after the initial experience. Further research into the lasting effects of alternative break programs is needed.

## **Awareness of Community Problems**

Consistent with our hypothesis, ASB participants demonstrated increased awareness of their respective communities after the program. This study indicates that immersion in the communities; time spent learning about the social, political, and economic landscapes of the host communities in predeparture workshops; and participants' independent research enabled participants to develop a deep understanding of their communities, including the problems those communities face (*Astin & Sax, 1998; Markus et al., 1993*). This finding is particularly significant because it highlights the important role of CSL programs—and specifically cocurricular programs—in developing students' sense of citizenship, a current emphasis in higher education (*Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Jones & Abes, 2004; McCarthy & Tucker, 2002; Ramaley, 2014; Rubin, 2001*). Programs like ASB have the potential to broaden students' understanding of social issues and complement their classroom learning to produce more globally aware citizens.

## **The Value of Community Service**

Involvement in the ASB program did not increase positive attitudes toward community service as hypothesized and as demonstrated in some of the existing CSL research (e.g., *Keen & Hall, 2009; Moely et al., 2002*). However, ASB participants scored higher than non-ASB participants on both pre- and post-program surveys. Given the high value placed on community service during the initial survey, there was little room for noticeable improvement in areas like recognizing the needs of the community and feeling a responsibility to help those in need. This finding may be indicative of a “ceiling effect,” wherein ASB participants tend to demonstrate extremely positive attitudes toward community service, as evidenced in their program applications, and participation in the program may confirm these attitudes rather than increase them.

## **Career Choices**

Surprisingly, ASB participants did not indicate a stronger interest in service-oriented careers compared to non-ASB participants. This finding was counter to our hypothesis as well as existing research on the impact of CSL on career-related decisions (*Jones & Abes, 2004; Markus et al., 1993; Simons & Cleary, 2005*). Because of the ASB program's interdisciplinary nature, students participated in a wide variety of projects, many of which may have been outside the scope of the students' academic and career interests, and this may

have affected responses to questions on this topic. Alternatively, CSL participation can open students' eyes to some of the challenging aspects of community-related work (e.g., long hours, sensitive issues, lack of resources) and may cause students to pause and reconsider the demands of a career in the nonprofit sector. That said, a statistical trend suggested the program could potentially have an impact on students' interest in service-oriented professions. This is consistent with the research of Niehaus and Kurotsuchi Inkelas (2015), which showed that participants in alternative breaks may experience subtle shifts in career intentions, and practitioners can work more closely with the institution's career center to facilitate career development. Further research, with a larger sample, would help to clarify the potential relationship between the ASB program and students' career choices.

### **Commitment to Community Service**

Not surprisingly, ASB students reported a greater desire to help than non-ASB students at all three survey points, but the program itself did not seem to substantially impact their desire to help. Like their positive attitudes toward community service, ASB participants' initial interest in giving back and making a difference is fairly high, as evidenced by their willingness to participate in the program. Although we imagined the program would encourage even greater commitment to community service, as demonstrated in the literature (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus et al., 1993; McCarthy & Tucker, 2002; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999; Moely et al., 2002; Porter & Monard, 2001), this study showed the program did not have this effect. It is possible that we are "preaching to the converted," and students who might receive the greatest benefit from involvement in CSL programs may not be participating. Program promotion emphasizes the community service element over the opportunity to travel or develop intercultural competence. Program marketing language likely appeals to students who have firmly entrenched values about volunteering and community engagement. In the future, ASB program coordinators might consider adjusting promotional techniques and/or application criteria in order to attract an even wider range of students. That said, a statistical trend suggested the program could have an impact on ASB participants. Further research—again, with a larger sample—would help to clarify the potential relationship between the ASB program and students' desire to help.

## Competence

Contrary to our predictions, the program itself did not seem to impact students' personal competence. However, a trend in the data suggested that these students came into and left the program with greater levels of confidence, interpersonal connections, and leadership ability than nonparticipants. This trend should be interpreted with caution, as the personal competence scale's Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .67$ ) was below the commonly stated lower limit of acceptable values ( $\alpha = .70$ ; see, for example, *Tavakol & Dennick, 2011.*) Perhaps students who are more willing to take risks and meet new people are more likely to apply to the program. We speculate that providing more information to would-be participants may help coordinators appeal to those less likely to push their boundaries. Revised marketing could include material emphasizing that the program offers a safe space to make friends, build confidence, and develop leadership skills.

## Teamwork

ASB participants did not appear to improve their teamwork skills or problem-solving abilities through the program. Although we assumed participation would promote gains related to understanding different perspectives and communicating opinions without judgment, these changes were not evident in the research. Because behaviors such as these are likely difficult to shift, it is not surprising that participation in a 1-week CSL program showed little impact. A future research study might isolate the experience of ASB student team leaders and examine whether their specific involvement in the program improves their capacity for team building.

## Limitations

Three limitations of this study are worth noting. First, for obvious ethical and practical reasons, it is not possible to randomly assign participants to the ASB and non-ASB groups in order to eliminate any preprogram group differences. Even though we attempted to reduce differences between the groups by matching the ASB and non-ASB participants on key demographic variables (e.g., gender, faculty), the results of the preprogram assessment suggest important differences between the groups that could conceivably predispose the ASB participants to be more receptive to the impact of the program than otherwise might be the case (which has the added effect of limiting the generalizability of the findings; *Elmes, Kantowitz, & Roediger, 1999*). This tendency toward predisposi-

tion could be addressed in future research by preassessing students' baseline levels of voluntary engagement in terms of number, length, and depth of activities. ASB participants and non-ASB participants with relatively low levels of engagement could be compared in order to avoid some of the predispositions of highly engaged ASB participants.

Second, only a small number of ASB participants completed more than one of the three surveys; 30 ASB participants completed the first and second surveys, but a negligible number completed all three surveys. With only 30 students completing the first two surveys, we likely did not have the ability to detect potential significant differences that would have been evident with a larger sample (Elmes *et al.*, 1999). This conclusion is supported by the trends that were evident using a less conservative standard for statistical significance.

Also, because only a negligible number of ASB participants completed all three surveys, we were required to analyze the results of the third survey separately from those of the first two, in effect rendering the design cross-sectional, not longitudinal, for the third survey. Differences between the first two surveys and the third survey may be attributable to differences between the participants and not the program, thereby limiting the strength of the conclusions that we can draw about the longer term impact of the program.

Third, women were overrepresented in the research, making up 90% and 88% of the sample for the pre- and post-ASB and follow-up surveys, respectively, relative to their participation in the program (71%) and enrollment at the university (55%). This overrepresentation is consistent with research on gender differences in survey response rates (e.g., Sax, Gilmartin, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2008). Unfortunately, it may limit the generalizability of our findings. In future research, investigators should specifically target the recruitment of men to ensure a more representative sample.

## Conclusions

We believe this study makes a substantive contribution to the limited body of research on cocurricular CSL in higher education. Our findings suggest that cocurricular CSL programs, such as alternative breaks, can positively impact undergraduate students in two important ways, through personal growth and personal effectiveness. The findings also suggest that other areas require investigation with a larger sample (i.e., desire to help, personal competence, and

the importance of a service-based career). Because of the growing interest in use of cocurricular CSL models like ASB, future research comparing the impacts of these experiences when offered as credit-bearing versus non-credit-bearing opportunities is warranted.

We have known for some time that CSL courses can contribute to positive civic attitudes, commitment to community service, and in some instances, greater comprehension of academic material. The results of this study complement those of Armstrong (2006) in confirming the value of cocurricular CSL, particularly in the form of immersive alternative break experiences, as a tool for supporting student growth and development. Researchers and practitioners have historically been hesitant to acknowledge cocurricular CSL as a legitimate form of CSL (e.g., Furco, 1996; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Rama et al., 2000). This study supports the utility of the alternative break model and prompts further research into the specific elements of the program that contribute most significantly to student development (e.g., reflection, team building, predeparture workshops). As most of the research to date has focused on short-term effects (e.g., Astin et al., 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus et al., 1993; Miller, 1994), this research has extended the literature to include an examination of the longer term effects of cocurricular CSL participation. Avolos et al.'s (1999) large-scale study on long-term effects of volunteerism (broadly defined) surveyed students from multiple institutions at three points, including 5 years postgraduation. In contrast, this study isolated a single alternative break program, allowing researchers to reflect specifically on the individual program's impact and the overall model's viability.

The findings from this research have provided the CSL community with important information about our student participants, who tend to be highly engaged, community-minded individuals. As providers of CSL opportunities, we need to examine our marketing, outreach, and application practices and ascertain how they can be more inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and for whom the program may be even more transformative. In addition, a mixed-methods research approach might allow us to obtain a more holistic understanding of ASB participants' experiences. Historically, students have reported difficulty articulating the value of their participation in the program. Focus groups or interviews may assist researchers in collecting rich descriptions that highlight new areas of students' development through the program.

Results from this study can be applied to three key program components in order to improve outcomes for future ASB partici-



pants. First, ASB coordinators can work more strategically with the institution's career counselors to build activities that improve students' awareness of career opportunities in the nonprofit sector. With intentional planning, ASB can offer students the chance to explore service-oriented careers and ascertain whether their skills and interests are well-suited to a career path in this area. Second, the program's reflective activities can be strengthened in order to maximize students' gains in personal growth and effectiveness. To this end, coordinators of the ASB program in question developed a structured ASB reflection workbook to assist students in their learning about international and cross-cultural activities and to support students in processing and recording changes to their beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Finally, these results should encourage coordinators to consider how they are working to keep participants engaged in community service after the immersive ASB experience. The 8-month follow-up survey showed decreased differences in personal effectiveness between the two groups, which suggests that coordinators can do more to help students focus on next steps for community engagement. This might involve post-ASB service days, group projects with local agencies related to the trips' themes, and/or additional follow-up meetings where teammates can share ideas and encourage each other to maintain their commitments.

This study supports the potential of cocurricular CSL, specifically in the form of alternative breaks, to influence student development in positive ways. Although cocurricular CSL has been historically less researched than curricular CSL and, as a result, less recognized in the field, we argue that there is value in approaching community-based education from multiple avenues, including days of service, semester or year-long projects with local nonprofits, community-based research, workshops and conferences on social justice issues, and democratic initiatives (e.g., elections, petitions, protests). Future research on these forms of cocurricular service programs would allow us to determine whether they help students achieve similar outcomes to those found for ASB participants in this study. Broadening the scope of community engagement opportunities can provide students with a greater variety of experiences that can lead to personal development. This is a step that institutions of higher education can take to meet the growing demand to graduate individuals who are socially responsible and globally aware.

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## About the Authors

**Stephanie Hayne Beatty** is the associate director of experiential learning in the Student Experience portfolio at Western University, Canada, where she leads campuswide experiential learning activities including work-integrated learning, community-engaged learning, and global experiences. She received her Master of Education from the University of Calgary and is currently completing a Doctor of Education from Western University.

**Ken N. Meadows** is an educational researcher with the Teaching Support Centre (TSC) and adjunct research faculty in the Faculty of Education at Western University, Canada. His research focuses on positive faculty and student development, the impact of educational development programs, and teaching cultures in post-secondary institutions. He received his Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Western University.

**Richard SwamiNathan** is the director of hiring, training, and development for Westcoast Connection/360 Student Travel. By leading community service and global adventure programs for teenagers, he uses his experience in student affairs at Western University, McMaster University, and Concordia University to enhance the learning and development of staff and participants. Richard received his Bachelor of Applied Human Science from the University of Guelph.

**Catherine Mulvihill** is in the role of special projects officer at Wilfrid Laurier University, supporting strategic initiatives for the institution. Prior to this, she spent 10 years working in student affairs roles, with a focus on experiential learning and student development. She received her Master of Education from the University of Calgary and her Master of Business Administration from Wilfrid Laurier University.

