

May 2012

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Recommended Citation

Lewandowski, S. W. (2012). My Appalachian Experience: Reflections of an Undergraduate Student on the Short-Term Service Trip and the Challenges It Presents for Social Justice Efforts. *PRISM: A Journal of Regional Engagement*, 1 (1). Retrieved from <https://encompass.eku.edu/prism/vol1/iss1/7>

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to deeply thank my university for giving me the opportunity to go on my short-term service trip to Appalachia and for providing me with a life-changing education that continues to encourage and improve my involvement in social justice. I have never before belonged to a community that is as committed to social justice as my college is. I would like to thank my fellow group members who went through the service trip experience with me and inspired me, taught me many things, helped keep me laughing, and prevented me from becoming discouraged as we came to grips with the momentous challenges of the work we were involved with. I would especially like to thank the non-profit organization we partnered with during our trip to Appalachia. Thank you for opening your arms to us, accepting us, taking the time to teach us, and seeing something special in us. Furthermore, I will forever be touched and inspired by the passion and dedication I witnessed from the people who worked there, especially the two people we worked most closely with during our trip. Lastly, thank you so much to all of the teachers, professors, family, and friends who have encouraged me in my academic pursuits and gone out of their way to support me in them. I truly could not have done this without you.

My Appalachian Experience: Reflections of an Undergraduate Student on the Short-Term Service Trip and the Challenges It Presents for Social Justice Efforts

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In this essay I explore the efficacy and value of short-term service trips by reflecting on a short-term service trip I took to Appalachia through my university. I consider how this trip impacted the way I think and feel about Appalachia. I argue that gaining feelings and knowledge from these trips is a necessary, yet insufficient, part of making them successful. These trips should also provide communities with service that benefits them and result in lasting structural change for them. However, as I experienced, students often encounter great challenges to doing social justice work both during and after their trips. During the trip, the service students do and knowledge they acquire might not benefit the host community much. I found that post-trip challenges to social justice largely stem from a lack of intentionality on the behalf of students to continue the social justice work they began in their host communities. This problem is greatly compounded by a lack of social support available to students after their service trips that would facilitate continued social justice efforts. I conclude that the university can assist students and social justice causes by adding greater structure to the transition from the short-term service trip to life after it.

Questioning the Short-Term Service Trip

Every room that I have lived in for the last four years has held somewhere in it, on a windowsill or desk, a small, glossy black piece of coal. The dark, roughly hewn, slightly grubby looking “decoration” must appear odd to others amidst my sterling silver trinkets, piles of academic papers, and photographs of loved ones. For me, however, my room does not look or feel complete until I unpack that little rock and carefully set it in a highly visible place. From time to time I pick it up and turn it over and over in my hand. As I do so, I think of Appalachia and remember why I decided to pocket the chunk of compressed carbon on the outskirts of a coal mining operation. I must never forget what I learned there, in Appalachia, and I especially must never forget the people who live there.

My short-term, week-long service trip to Appalachia definitely helped cement images of the place in my mind: mountains so beautiful they could move even the non-religious to awe at their multicolored grandeur; the jarring look of a mountain flattened by mountain-top removal, a brown gash through a vibrant landscape usually covered with vegetation; a powerful river, coursing through the bottom of a valley; a pool of water a shockingly rusty orange color, the result of acid mine drainage from coal mines; a mayor beaming as he showed us his city’s improved water filtration system; a dedicated city employee working hard to establish and run his county’s first ever recycling program; the director of our non-profit, her head wrapped in a bandanna, battling cancer, yet still fighting for sustainability and community organizing with an inspiring level of knowledge, dedication, and passion. Over four years after my trip to Appalachia, these images are still clearly etched into my mind, just waiting for some reminder, such as my piece of coal, to bring them back up.

Accompanying these images are feelings for a people and a place that have experienced lasting injustices. I feel an attachment to Appalachian nature and a sense of loss over its destruction in order to obtain coal. I feel great sadness that not only does coal mining ravage the natural environment, but it also tends to leave Appalachians in increasingly economically disadvantaged situations.² Lastly, I also felt moved by the local people I met and their determination to improve their community despite the social, political, and economic resistance they often faced.

But does having these feelings alone signal that I embarked on a successful short-term service learning trip? If so, are these feelings enough, or does the impact of short-term service learning trips need to go further? How are students' behaviors affected by these trips months and even years after they are done with them? Beyond how student participants are affected by these trips, what kinds of impacts, if any, do they have on host populations; especially, do these trips result in any kind of lasting structural change for host populations? These are the main questions I will be tackling throughout the remainder of this essay.

The Limitations of Service Work and Experiential Learning

For part of our pre-trip preparations, my group and I met with campus leaders to learn about Appalachia and the complexities of doing social justice work. One article we read during this learning process was Van Engen's (2000) "The Cost of Short Term Missions," which offered an insightful critique of short-term missionary work. In this article Van Engen argues that short-term mission trips often become more about the participants than the host populations they are trying to serve. Participants tend to fixate upon how good they feel about themselves for doing service work and how thankful they are for their lives once they witness the lives of the materially poor. Instead of focusing on serving the host population in a way that most benefits the local people and brings about lasting structural change, participants focus on how they have changed as individuals as a result of their trip. I think that due to the thorough pre-service training I experienced, I had a sound awareness of the need to maintain focus on the community we would be working with. Perhaps this is why, when I reflect upon the feelings I have towards this trip and Appalachia in general, they are mostly geared towards the people and the place and not towards how I felt about myself post-trip. I undoubtedly experienced a personal transformation on this trip, but with the proper pre-service training, I think that this transformation extended beyond self-learning to encompass a better understanding of the structural injustices Appalachians face and an increased concern and care for a people I had previously known almost nothing about.

Again though, I question whether feelings are enough, and I think that Van Engen would agree with me in saying that they are not. To me, and as we noted during our pre-service training and as Van Engen notes, effective short-term service trips should result in some type of continued social justice efforts. In essence, the impact of the trip should not end when the trip does. Instead, individuals should be changed during their trip in a way such that they can use experiences from their trip and leverage them to attain a greater social consciousness and ultimately, to effect some type of social structural change. Thus far, I have discussed mostly an emotional response to my trip to Appalachia. I think that perhaps these feelings are a necessary foundation upon which the impetus for social action can be built, but it still remains to be seen what kinds of concrete actions and benefits to the local people my trip resulted in.

First, there is the work that we did while on the trip itself, which centered on removing debris from ravines.³ Unlike the work that Van Engen (2000) mentions being done on short-term mission trips (for which I am drawing a parallel to short-term service trips in general), which is often not that beneficial to the community (such as painting a building), we were told by community members that the work we were doing was needed and appreciated. According to the director of our non-profit and a city employee, with a large number of people volunteering many hours of labor, the county saved a lot of money in clean-up costs, money that could then be used in other needed areas. However, I wonder if we knew the whole story, if our work was really as straightforwardly helpful as we initially understood it to be.

I know that my group and I sometimes felt a bit discouraged by the work we were doing—were we really contributing that much to the community at all? I also question whether us picking up this trash was in the best interests of the local people. How did picking up trash translate into lasting social change for this community, especially when our actions were local, but the injustices this community faced would need to be addressed on state, national, and even international levels, in addition to a local one? My most honest conclusion is that our work did not benefit local people that much. Sure it may have saved the county money that could then be spent elsewhere, but maybe this money would have been best spent on employing local people to do this work.

Though I cannot accurately assess how economically valuable our work actually was to local people, I can say with more certainty that the work we did did not seem to empower local people that much. Outside of those at the non-profit organization we partnered with, no other local people participated in the work that we did, perhaps indicating that the community was not that informed about opportunities to clean up the environment or they did not care that much to do so. In fact, I think that local people sometimes viewed our work as a bit intrusive, and understandably so. Who were we to go into their community and pick up trash that was not even really viewed as a pressing problem? We could have come across as patronizing, as if we thought we knew better than the community and so would address their problems for them because they did not take them seriously enough. Of course, this was never our intention, but, difficult as it may be, I still need to admit that this is how, at times, we may have been perceived. And herein lies a major challenge of and source of tension when working with marginalized communities: Your work may be welcomed by some key community members, but not by the public in general.

As a result of feeling potentially insulting to those whom they initially wanted to benefit, volunteers may be tempted to give up on their social justice efforts. However, I think that, once acknowledged, the tension that is often inherent in service work can become a powerful learning tool. Students can seek to better understand what the community's priorities are and why they are that way. They can consider under what conditions more local people may want to become involved in the work they are doing. Lastly, they can learn to understand and respect the views of those who appreciate their work and also of those who could care less about it or even view it negatively.

Thus far, when thinking about the actions that happened as a result of our trip, I have discussed some of the actual service work our group did. The other major effort made during our trip, by both our group and the community members we worked with, was to further our understanding of the issues Appalachians experience today and how these relate to broader political, economic, and social trends. That is, my social consciousness grew,

and I developed a more nuanced understanding of the structural injustices and challenges Appalachians face. We were taken to sites of mountain-top removal and contaminated water (the lasting images and accompanying feelings from such visits were mentioned earlier in this essay), and we talked to an array of knowledgeable people on how the coal mining industry adversely affects public health, economic stability, and the quality of the environment in Appalachia. One potentially problematic aspect of the knowledge my group and I gained from our trip is that though we sought to understand the injustices Appalachians experience on a structural level, this newfound knowledge remained primarily contained within the group instead of spreading out to further educate local people. Later, I will also question how we used this knowledge once we were back in our own collegiate community, asking whether it was shared with any more people or still remained largely housed within ourselves.

The Challenges of Post-Trip Social Justice

On one of the last nights of our trip, sitting in a circle at the bottom of a grassy hill as the last of the sun dropped below the horizon, our group had an especially poignant reflection. We talked about the admiration we had for the director of our partnering non-profit organization and how she inspired us. Even though sick and battling cancer, she still exuded energy and within seconds of bringing up almost any topic, she could rattle off information as if she had studied almost every subject there was. And indeed she had. She fought for Appalachia and Appalachians everywhere, and the way she could analyze social problems and then speak about concrete efforts being made to address these problems left you with almost no choice but to feel empowered. In the glow of candlelight, I could see my group members' eyes shining with tears as we talked about this remarkable woman and worried over who would continue her good work if she passed away.

I suppose, in many ways, we are supposed to carry on her work, whether she is with us, or whether we have to soldier on without her. And here is presented, to me at least, the most challenging part of a short-term service trip, which is continuing social justice efforts after the trip is done. When I think about what I have done for Appalachians since my trip, I think what I most feel is a sense of disappointment. As I hope has been made clear by this essay, I have not forgotten about the Appalachian people, and I frequently think about how I want to do more to assist them. However, once I left the structured setting of my trip, where our days were largely planned out for us, and lost the support of my group members and community partners, I think that I felt much less empowered to help make positive changes for Appalachians. Before I discuss what I think could be done to make transitioning from service during short-term service trips to service after these trips easier and more effective, I will first note some things that I have done as a result of my trip to Appalachia.

I think that I have occasionally been able to help educate others on some of what Appalachia has historically gone through and what it faces today. If people say rude or slanderous things about Appalachians, I can feel myself bristling in their defense. Once I rein my emotions in, I try to politely fill these people in with the knowledge that I have gained about Appalachia. So, in some ways, I may be making a contribution, however miniscule, to expanding the social discourse on Appalachia, the hoped outcomes of which would be to lessen the stereotypes and marginalization Appalachians experience. One drawback to this type of education is that it is mostly reactionary and thus not that proactive. Instead of actively engaging others in discussions about Appalachia, I wait to speak up until I feel that

a misunderstanding of the region and its people has been communicated. Since Appalachia is not all that commonly discussed by those I encounter, my reactionary method limits my opportunities to inform others about the region.

Even if I was doing a better job informing others, I would still like to do more for Appalachia than just talk about it. I try to stay relatively informed on political issues and vote for candidates who I think will act to alleviate poverty, improve environmental health, and create a more sustainable economic base (sustainable in the environmental and social senses of the word), all of which seem to have the potential to aid Appalachians. In all honesty though, I'm neither as informed nor as politically involved as I should be. I could do much more reading on current events and on various candidates' stances on issues that affect Appalachians. I could contact more of my representatives, sign more petitions, and do more with local politics. I could probably also vote in more elections. Further still, I could boycott or march or organize. These things all strike me as potentially powerful steps to take on the path to creating real, large-scale change, and yet, they are actions that I have seldom specifically taken on the behalf of Appalachia. What happened to the students who were once moved to tears by the injustices that they saw? What happened to the fires of activism that were once lit within our hearts?

Improving the Short-Term Service Trip

I think what would have most helped my activism continue after my trip to Appalachia would have been some form of continued community support, which Ver Beek (2008) also concluded can help make short-term service trips more effective. I think that our ministry department, which used to organize these types of trips, may have held a reunion for ABI participants, but that is the only event I can remember being offered after our ABI that was specifically tailored to ABI participants. I wish that my group would have had some follow-up meetings after the trip. I know we talked about it, but nothing ever materialized. We were going to tour a recycling plant, see how it was done and make sure it was done well, as the director of our partnering non-profit organization told us to make sure that the places we lived were environmentally sound in addition to advocating for Appalachia. We were also going to figure out where the coal our city used came from and if it was supporting the unjust practices we had vividly witnessed in Appalachia.

I'll never be exactly sure of what would have happened if our group had better followed through on the post-trip plans we had made, but my guess is that we would have learned more, educated more people, better maintained our group bond, and been more inclined to become politically involved. Maybe we would have started a student club focused on Appalachia, taken another trip there, raised money to donate to our partnering non-profit organization, and hosted events about Appalachia on our campus. What happened though was this: We got back to school and became caught up in the business of midterms. Many of us were in different years in college than one another and had no classes together. In essence, we became swept up in our own lives, and while for many of us, our lives still included social justice activities of some sort, we didn't make time for Appalachia. We weren't purposeful or intentional enough about what we wanted to do for Appalachia after we got back to our own community, and with that, our plan of action for when we returned home faded into being just ideas we once had and words we had once spoken.

My group had been a strong and dedicated one, but even we were not very successful in coming together to continue the social justice work we had only just begun in Appalachia. Of course, much of the responsibility of continuing such work belongs to students, but I also think that the university can greatly assist students in this process by offering some sort of post-trip community structure that gives students a chance to come together and take action on the social issues they were introduced to during their trips. Perhaps post-service meetings and reflections should be included as some of the commitments students agree to when they go on short-term service trips (which is something that Ver Beek (2008) also concludes). These meetings could function as a student club of sorts where students continue to reflect on what they learned during their trips. There could even possibly be a goal or requirement that students participate in or lead some type of event or action post-trip that relates to the service trip they took. Some students may even be inspired to start student clubs around the issues they encountered on their short-term trips. Another possibly more pragmatic approach would be to have students see if the clubs and activities they are already involved in are amenable to adding Appalachian-focused components to their agendas. Whether students end up utilizing student clubs as a means of continuing their service work or not, post-trip meetings could encourage them to brainstorm ideas for continued justice efforts while providing them with the support needed to see these ideas actualized.

I think that this community structure equips students with the power of synergy and helps them feel more empowered to make social changes than if they were just individually trying to address the social justice issues they had learned about. Overall, the more the university is able to help students transition to post-service life, especially in the sense of helping them secure outlets for the continued expression of their interest in the social justice issues they encountered during their trips, the more they will be doing to help prevent the dreaded post-service crash. In this crash students become preoccupied with their own daily commitments, doubt whether they can actually be effective agents for social change, and ultimately do not follow through on actions they could take that would potentially benefit the communities they once served in.

The good news is that short-term service programs can be improved upon at the student and university levels if the time and care is taken to do so. That there are so many dedicated students and community partners willing to participate in these trips is also very encouraging. The last thing we want after service trips is for the dazzling energy of students and communities to turn into an overwhelming and even paralyzing sense of disappointment as they consider the lack of tangible benefits these service trips have resulted in. Instead, students and universities must work to harness this energy before, during, and *after* these short-term service trips in order to ensure that effective social justice work continues long after students have left the communities that initially captivated their minds and hearts and gave them new causes to be involved in. With these improvements to the short-term service trip, students will have the chance to more closely align the knowledge and feelings they garnered during their trips with the social action this knowledge and these feelings have made them want to take. Through learning from the dissonance between feelings and actions that I and likely many other students have experienced after short-term service trips, I have hope that a greater harmony between these trips and social justice can arise.

Notes

¹Mountain-top removal is a process wherein the tops of mountains are removed using explosives in order to get at underlying coal seams. Much of the removed part of the mountain, which is referred to as “overburden,” is often dumped into neighboring valleys. The entire process leads to serious environmental degradation of the mined area.

²Coal companies often promise that if they are given the chance to operate in a town, they will provide plentiful jobs for the local people in return. However, in actuality they hire only a small number of local people, usually much less than the town expected they would. Then, after all the profitable coal has been extracted and the environment degraded, the coal companies move to another town, leaving an even more tenuous economic base in their wake.

³For a long time many parts of Appalachia did not have adequate waste management programs, so people turned to disposing garbage in natural areas as a last resort. Even though waste management programs have since been instated, layers upon layers of trash can still be unearthed in many Appalachian landscapes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to deeply thank my university for giving me the opportunity to go on my short-term service trip to Appalachia and for providing me with a life-changing education that continues to encourage and improve my involvement in social justice. I have never before belonged to a community that is as committed to social justice as my college is. I would like to thank my fellow group members who went through the service trip experience with me and inspired me, taught me many things, helped keep me laughing, and prevented me from becoming discouraged as we came to grips with the momentous challenges of the work we were involved with. I would especially like to thank the non-profit organization we partnered with during our trip to Appalachia. Thank you for opening your arms to us, accepting us, taking the time to teach us, and seeing something special in us. Furthermore, I will forever be touched and inspired by the passion and dedication I witnessed from the people who worked there, especially the two people we worked most closely with during our trip. Lastly, thank you so much to all of the teachers, professors, family, and friends who have encouraged me in my academic and social justice pursuits and gone out of their way to support me in them. I would not be where I am today without all of you.

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About the Author

• Samantha Lewandowski graduated from Loyola University Chicago in December 2011 with a B.A. in Sociology/Anthropology and a B.S. in Environmental Science. She presented her work on sustainable development in inner cities at the 2011 Undergraduate Research Symposium at Loyola and served as an Undergraduate Fellow for Loyola's Center for Urban Research and Learning where she was involved with the City of Chicago's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness. Ms. Lewandowski plans to attend graduate school in the future.

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