

Alternative Spring Break: Engagement in a Rural, Low-Income Community

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ABSTRACT

Community engagement programs offer college students an opportunity to impact youth in rural, low-income communities. While in a rural setting where educational training and support is not abundant, college students learn about struggles that rural, low-income youth face in exploring and attending postsecondary education options. The Alternative Spring Break (ASB) program in Vinton County impacts over 1,000 youth each year by increasing their awareness to education opportunities beyond high school. ASB college students are provided classroom instruction time to deliver content and real-life experiences to Vinton County youth.

Keywords: college access, college students, rural youth, postsecondary exploration

Cooperative Extension has been the historical model of engaged scholarship and service learning in the land-grant university system (Stoecker, 2014). Extension's history as "on the ground" community experts for their local area make them a natural fit for off-campus service-learning opportunities for college students (Stoecker, 2014). Students are encouraged and sometimes required by colleges and universities to pursue service-learning experiences. Alternative spring breaks (ASBs) are volunteer, service-focused educational experiences that empower college students to become active learners and engaged citizens (Mann & DeAngelo, 2016). College students who participate in service-learning opportunities with K-12 education partners indicate an increased appreciation for cultural diversity after participation (Conner & Erickson, 2017).

Youth raised in low-income households with parents who lack higher education are less likely to enroll in college, and that trend is continuing (Bruna et al., 2017). Historically, efforts to promote college have focused on the individual barriers that

youth experience including academic performance, access to money, and ability to attend higher education either virtually or in-person (Bruna et al., 2017). Encouraging youths to aspire to pursue higher education is important, as low-income students often see their ability to achieve their goals as limited because of social context, family expectations, and cultural stigmas (Tzenis, 2018).

Not unlike youth living in urban areas (Bates et al., 2019), youth living in rural areas are attending resource-strapped schools, growing up in households with low adult educational attainment, and lacking access to supports for pursuing postsecondary education options. The program described here was designed to expose rural Vinton County K-12 youths to opportunities for education beyond a high school diploma. As much of the literature describes the benefits of ASBs for the college student (Celio et al., 2011; Mann & DeAngelo, 2016; Niehaus et al., 2017), the focus here is on describing the program rationale, structure, and partner roles, which may aid other Extension educators interested in designing a similar program.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Existing literature indicates that there are four models of engagement that include institutions of higher education and their work with Extension educators to provide service-learning opportunities (Stoecker, 2014). ASB as conducted in Vinton County encompasses the direct service support model, where college students are delivering the program to K-12 students. Extension faculty work directly with college students to provide orientation and training to prepare them to work in a population where community members’ backgrounds and demographics could be significantly different from that of the students (Stoecker, 2014). The goals of this ASB are to (a) increase the awareness among rural youth of postsecondary education options, and (b) expose college students to the struggles that rural, low-income youth face in thinking about postsecondary education.

The Vinton County ASB filled a gap in the career awareness instruction provided by the school district by exposing youth in the school district to options for higher education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), 33.6% of adults aged over 25 years in Vinton County, Ohio, have received no education beyond a high school diploma (Ohio – 32.6%). Therefore, ASB in Vinton County approached

postsecondary options from the angle of making connections with those who currently attend college. We believed this approach could equip Vinton County students with questions they should ask those adults in their lives who are supportive of pursuing a postsecondary education.

The Vinton County ASB is a collaborative project between Ohio State University Extension, Vinton County Local Schools, and The Ohio State University (OSU) Office of Student Life’s Buck-I-Serv that developed out of an effort of a staff member in the OSU Economic Access office that had a passion for rural, Appalachian counties. She viewed that getting OSU students in front of rural youth talking about education beyond a high school diploma could help motivate students to overcome the economic barriers they might perceive for obtaining a postsecondary education. OSU Extension has a county office in each county, so that was the local connection the Economic Access Office needed to make the ASB program a reality. Partner roles are summarized in Table 1.

The OSU students spend their spring break week interacting with over 1,000 students in Vinton County schools helping youth consider a variety of postsecondary options along with expanding their own knowledge and experiences ([Table 2](#)).

Table 1. *Roles of Partners in ASB program*

Partner	Role
Ohio State University Extension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops content for lessons that are taught at each grade level • Develops weekly schedule for ASB program • Coordinates logistics with teachers at each grade level to develop a schedule for the day
Office of Student Life: Buck-I-Serv	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruits, selects, and orients students for ASB trip • Arranges housing accommodations and transportation logistics
Vinton County Local Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodates ASB programming in their classroom schedules • Supports the ASB program as completing an element in each student’s Viking Success Plan that requires a monthly exposure to careers and postsecondary options for youth

Table 2. *Experiences of College Students*

Inside Classroom	Outside Classroom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energize students to pursue an education beyond high school • Experience personal growth through service to youth who might lack a support system or knowledgeable family adult who can answer their questions about postsecondary options • Explore future plans one-on-one with students during informal class group discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with staff from Rio Grande Community College – McArthur Center about the challenges and struggles they see working with local high school graduates as they enroll in postsecondary education • Meet with Vinton County Local School Board to share the content they will be delivering in the schools during the week • Dialogue with county Extension Advisory Committee on perceived challenges and barriers for Vinton County youth exploring postsecondary education • Explore local tourism sites to learn about rural Appalachian history and culture

The Office of Student Life: Buck-I-Serv program is solely responsible for recruiting students for ASB trips. They promote the availability of trips to the entire student body, but also include some targeted recruitment for students who are currently or previously enrolled in the Leadership in Service course. These students are connecting course content and pedagogies on service learning to the ASB experience but come from a wide variety of majors across the university. Fewer than 50% of the students who participate in ASB trips come from the course recruitment, so the university-wide student promotion efforts are essential for the program’s success. Buck-I-Serv selects four to five students plus one trip leader for the ASB trip annually.

Once college students are selected for the trip, Buck-I-Serv staff select a trip leader and train them to lead the group from pre-trip planning through post-trip reflections. The group leader is a faculty, staff, or graduate student at the university and is responsible for all trip details in partnership with the Buck-I-Serv office staff. This responsibility includes at minimum three trainings for trip participants on expectations, behavior, program structure,

value of service, and importance of reflection to the service experience. Extension faculty meet with the group on campus during their third meeting to give a general overview of the county and review the schedule for each school. The meeting on campus is also used to finalize activities for the year’s program based on feedback from teachers, students, and OSU students who participated in the program the previous year. Content and discussion topics are developed to be age appropriate and applicable to K-12 students in each grade and are delivered by college students in a variety of engaging formats during the weeklong program ([Table 3](#)).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Vinton County Local Schools comprises five buildings (high school, middle school and three elementary schools) with a district student body of 1,956 students who are 97% White and is the only school district in Vinton County. ASB is conducted annually with students in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 11, so students are participating in ASB programs eight times before graduation at each

Table 3. Program Content Delivered to K-12 Students

Grade	Content
Elementary (grades 3-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How to Go to College: 4 Steps” • Engineering activity that allows them time to interact one-on-one with college students
Middle School (grades 6-8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for high school: Preparing now for my goal after a diploma • Identifying the people and resources in my life who can help me achieve my goal
High School (grades 9-11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing for tests and setting yourself up for success • So many options for education and training: How do I continue to prepare for my senior year?

grade level. Across all five buildings, 25% of the student body live below the poverty level and 91% qualify for the free or reduced lunch rates; both of these factors create economic barriers for many students to consider postsecondary education due to cost. Vinton County High School had a 93% graduation rate over the last four years (2017-2020) with an average of 62% of those graduates indicating they will pursue a postsecondary education after graduation.

Measures

Surveys were distributed to students the week following the program to evaluate the increase in awareness among students of postsecondary education options. Middle and high school students responded to post-program evaluations that included responding to eight questions with “Yes,” “Sort of,” or “No.” Below are samples of the questions asked in the evaluation.

Following the program with OSU students last week...

- Do you have more education options to consider beyond a high school diploma?
- Are you aware of someone who has attended college who might be able to answer questions?
- Can you name two options for education and training post-high school that are close to Vinton County?

- Do you feel prepared to explore postsecondary education options after high school necessary for your career interest area?

Elementary students completed a survey, where they selected “Yes” or “No” to six statements such as the following:

- My teacher went to college.
- I learned there are options for education after high school.
- I know a local college near Vinton County.

The second goal of the program, “expose college students to the struggles that rural, low-income youth face in thinking about postsecondary education” has not been assessed thus far. College students are getting direct exposure to the challenges that youth face in Vinton County through their out-of-the classroom experiences with the local Extension Advisory committee, Rio Grande Community College personnel, and Vinton County Local School Board members.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The ASB program just completed its 10th year serving Vinton County students. During 2019 and 2020, assessments were collected from students through individual self-administered surveys about their awareness and knowledge of postsecondary options.

Table 4. *Students Served by Grade Level and Cooperating Teachers During 2020-21 School Year*

Grade	Students	Teachers
3 rd Grade	132	3
4 th Grade	122	3
5 th Grade	137	3
6 th Grade	117	2
7 th Grade	145	2
8 th Grade	159	2
9 th Grade	140	2
11 th Grade	118	1
TOTAL	1070	18

Qualitative data from the middle and high school student surveys indicate an overall increase in awareness of postsecondary education options after participating in the ASB program.

- o 91% responded they know someone who attended college.
- o 87% responded they could name two options for local postsecondary education.
- o 84% responded they know postsecondary options that are available following high school.
- o 65% responded they feel prepared to explore postsecondary education options necessary for their career interest.

Youth who participate in the program indicate an increase in awareness and knowledge surrounding postsecondary options locally, as well as resources that could assist them in exploring options based on their career interests (whether those were self-identified or identified through a school-sponsored aptitude assessment).

Elementary students responded to a series of statements about education options following high school and resources accessible for exploring those options. The subsequent bullets indicate the percentage of students answering “Yes” to the statement when surveyed one week post ASB program participation.

- o 90% to “My teacher went to college.”
- o 88% to “I learned there are options for education after high school.”

- o 68% to “I know a local college near Vinton County.”

Even though the ASB program completed its 10th year of programming in Vinton County during 2020, we have not measured the effect of knowledge and awareness on students who have received multiple years of ASB programming. COVID-19 restrictions in educational settings saw the ASB program absent during 2021 and 2022, so additional evaluation data from students could not be collected at that time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Finding a community engagement opportunity that fits the needs of the community, Extension staff, and service-learners leads to a program that has the potential for success (Johnson et al., 2019). Vinton County ASB was designed around addressing the value to each partner in the program and making sure their needs were met. It serves as an annual boost to the postsecondary aspirations of youth in Vinton County and gives them information that assists them in developing a goal for the future. Colleges are looking to broaden their students’ exposure to social issues and to develop their skills for civic engagement while serving the communities in their respective states. ASB expands the mutual value of connecting land-grant universities with county Extension programs and their impacts on youth.

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