Discussion or Reflection Activity

“True ASB’er Disputes Criticism” (Kevin Markham, Vanderbilt University)

Review the attached response to an editorial criticizing the ASB program and program participants at Vanderbilt University. (Unfortunately, the original editorial could not be located, but you will get a sense of criticisms based on the response written by Kevin Markham). How would you respond to a similar criticism of Stanford’s ASB program or of your trip/team in particular?

Some possible questions for discussion or as a prompt for a reflection paper:

-What could have led the original editorial writer to arrive at his opinion of the ASB program?
-How do we articulate the mission/purpose of the Stanford ASB program? Is this accurate/appropriate?
-What is the value of the Stanford ASB experience?
  -for the participants
  -for the community/community organizations visited
  -for the Stanford campus community
-What is the appropriate attitude or posture participants should demonstrate when involved in ASB?
-Why should ASSU funds be used to support the ASB program?
-Could/should these resources be used in a more effective way to address community needs/social issues?
-Why should the ASB program offer trips outside of our immediate community? What is the value added?
-How can we effectively tell our ASB story and share our experience with the campus community?
-What would your 1-minute “elevator speech” about ASB include?
"True ASBer disputes criticism"

[This editorial is available online here.]

Vanderbilt Hustler - March 23, 2001
By Kevin Markham

It always bothers me when somebody who has never participated in a program, and is clearly unfamiliar with a program, feels justified in making harsh judgments about that program. Case in point: Mike Van Buren, in his editorial on Tuesday about the Alternative Spring Break program.

Before I discuss the goals of ASB, I first want to address some of Mike's unfair criticism of ASB participants.

He claims that ASB is a way for Vanderbilt students to feel good about themselves, and that the experience changes participants in "an artificial way that allows [them] to act morally superior around [their] friends." Mike, how many ASB participants do you actually know? I know my site leader partner, my ten participants this year, my group of ten from last year, the 11 members of the ASB Board, 48 other site leaders, and at least 30 other people who have been on ASB, and my experience has shown me that your statement does not accurately reflect the attitude of a single person in that group. I am sure that there are a few individuals that possess the attitude you describe, which is not unusual for an organization with an annual participation of 300, but I challenge you to find more than a few individuals who really fit that description.

Mike mentions that "some of the worst poverty in the country can be found in Nashville and in rural eastern Tennessee," and he encourages ASB groups to do service there. Actually, ASB already has two groups that spend their break in Nashville, and
another group that works in rural eastern Tennessee. And while he may still criticize those ASB participants who travel to sites far away, motivated (according to Mike) by a desire to "believe that poverty is something far removed from their lives," he should know that many participants pick sites close to their hometowns in order to gain a better understanding of the social issues affecting their towns.

Mike does have a valid point, though, when he claims that many ASB participants would rather travel to far-away places than staying in Nashville. While these places are far from "exotic," as he claims, I agree that ASB would have less participation if all of the sites were in Nashville. People do want to visit other places over break. However, because ASB is such a valuable experience for its participants, and because it has the potential to foster a spirit of service, I believe that is completely acceptable for the site location to be the reason someone is initially attracted to ASB.

Mike is also critical of how ASB spends its money, claiming that the money we spend going on break would better serve the population through donations. I agree that monetary donations are important to all community organizations, but I firmly believe that this pales in comparison to the importance of showing people love through service, which motivates those we serve to continue using the donations after we are gone.

Next, Mike claims "ASB-goers do not undertake a long-term evaluation of their views about poverty." Regardless of what issue he believes ASB participants should think about, he should know that a clear component of the ASB program, one that many other service programs lack, is regular and structured reflection and evaluation of our views and experiences. I cannot speak for others, but I can promise you that my ASB experience has helped me to develop into a more critically thinking individual.

Mike's final criticism of the ASB program is that its participants "do not, however, continue to be involved in the community." First, I challenge Mike to explain how he came to this
conclusion. Does he know about the service activities of the hundreds of current and former participants? Regardless, I want to briefly discuss "re-orientation," ASB's post-break meeting. At re-orientation, they asked all sites that had plans to do service with their group to stand, and nearly the entire room rose to their feet. During a discussion on continued community involvement (which is a central part of ASB's mission statement), four of the campus service organizations Mike urges participants to work with actually spoke about how to get involved. Even if Mike doubts the intentions and future actions of all of these ASB participants, I can at least promise him that my ASB site of 12 is planning both group and individual service in the Nashville community.

Finally, I want to address Mike's comment that "the majority of these people have missed the point of these trips." From what I can tell, I believe that Mike is actually the one missing much of the point of ASB. I don't fault him for this, though, because it is not until you have actually participated in ASB that you realize how much ASB is not just about service. It is about learning from the people you try to serve, the people you work with, and the people in your ASB group. It is about exposing yourself to another culture and comparing it with your own. It is about reflecting on what you are doing and why you are doing it. It is about giving 11 Board members and 50 site leaders a meaningful leadership experience. It is about learning to live for a week with a group of people you barely know, sharing special moments with that group, and being inspired by the people in your group. It is about spending a week with people you probably never would have met, people you may have had stereotypes about, and ending up friends with all of these people. It is about having fun while doing service, and learning to love doing service. It is about challenging yourself to try something new, and allowing it to change who you are. It is about having an experience that will definitely stay with you forever, and hopefully change the way you live the rest of your life, even if only by a little bit. If ASB fulfills at least some of these goals for each and every participant, I consider the program a complete success.