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DURHAM, N.H. -- With the winter blahs striking and spring break beckoning with possibilities for warm adventures, more than 100 University of New Hampshire students are taking the Alternative Break Challenge (ABC) choosing to use their time off to provide service to 13 nonprofit agencies throughout the country.

Students volunteering on the seven member ABC executive committee provide the program’s leadership, organizing the trips, interviewing trip leaders, and tending to details like fund-raising, driver safety courses, advertising, website and much more. Marianne Fortescue, service-learning coordinator at UNH, is available for consultation but the students run the show.

“The majority of our real work starts in October, when we start signing up Habitat for Humanity trips,” says Rick Walsh co-director, from Medfield, Mass. “The trips are the lowest cost in many years—just $150—due to grants we have written and received from the student activity fee and the Parent’s Association.”

The students use their week off to help build houses in low-income communities, make and serve meals in homeless shelters, teach in a pre-school, or maintain trails in state parks. They travel in vans to places like Iowa, Arkansas, Mississippi, Nebraska, Michigan and N. Carolina.

“The Habitat trips offer students a really good opportunity to meet UNH students who they haven’t known before and also to meet people who don’t have as much as they do,” says Elizabeth Solimini of Hamden, Ct., coordinator of the Habitat for Humanity trips. “It really draws people closer.”

The UNH ABC program began in 1994, one of the earliest in a nation-wide, student-run movement. Each campus program runs independently, with students researching volunteer opportunities, arranging for vans and training students to be trip leaders. About a week after the students return, they hold a debriefing session to share their stories, photographs and what they learned.