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UNH Students Take a Break to Make a Difference for Others

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DURHAM, N.H.— Spring break is on the horizon and for 126 University of New Hampshire students fun in the sun means wielding a hammer to build a house for Habitat for Humanity, making soup and working in a shelter for homeless people in Washington, DC or Jackson, Mississippi, clearing and repairing paths as part of Appalachian Trail maintenance, helping in after-school programs in East St. Louis, Illinois or Dallas, Texas, or providing outdoor education experiences for Cherokee nation children in North Carolina.

The students are taking their week off and offering their energy and enthusiasm as part of 14 trips organized by the Alternative Break Challenge (ABC), a program run by students for students. At UNH, the legwork is taken care of by the ABC executive committee made up of co-directors Erin Delaney and Rick Walsh and committee member Ashley Standbridge. Marianne Fortescue, coordinator for service learning UNH's Partnership for Social Action, serves as the group's advisor.

Found on campuses across the United States and at UNH since 1994, each campus program operates independently, with student organizers researching potential sites and raising the funds needed for vans to get the students there. Two students, who have previously participated in ABC, are assigned as trip leaders for each project. At an ABC fair in early December, the leaders sell their projects to interested students. Students name their top three choices and then the executive committee goes to work matching them up with what's available.

This year, for the first time, the ABC team is planning to guide students to local service opportunities after they return. The committee will host a debriefing session about two weeks after everyone returns where the students will gather to share slides, discuss their experiences and learn about local service possibilities.

“The basis of ABC is helping other people and the idea is it doesn't have to stop when you get home,” says Delaney, a sophomore who taught at a Dallas after-school program last year and who will travel to Cherokee, North Carolina, this week to offer outdoor education after-school experiences.

Editors, News Directors: If you are interested in interviewing UNH students at their Alternative Break Challenge sites, please contact Marianne Fortescue at 862-2197.