Haiti Journal: An Alternative Leadership Learning Experience

by Jacques Eric Pape

Learning to Lead in Unfamiliar Territories

Can scholars develop into leaders by immersing them in challenging, real-life situations during an alternative Spring break in Haiti?

For nine days, twenty-six students—from Morehouse College, Spelman College, and Georgia State—and two faculty members engaged in a transformative leadership learning experience, unmatched by any classroom teachings or case studies. The Leadership Center at Morehouse College helped develop this trip as it aligned with the college President’s vision of developing “Renaissance men with a social conscience and a global perspective.”

The Beginning of a Great Legacy

The biggest reason I wanted to bring scholars, students, faculty, and researchers to Haiti was to open their hearts and minds to the health and economic disparities that exist in Haitian societies, like in so many others around the world. The first step towards uplifting communities from economic, social, and political injustice is to be cognizant of the fact that these disparities exist in the first place, and that there are ways in which we can work with those in need to achieve a favorable and sustainable outcome.

To give you some background on this alternative-learning project, the idea germinated when I took Dr. Melvinia T. King’s Ethical Leadership and the Global North/South Crisis class in Fall 2010 at Morehouse College. The following spring I enrolled in Leadership and Civic Engagement and Ethical Leadership, the latter being the capstone course for a minor in Leadership Studies. As an interdisciplinary program, capstone projects require the input of many departments and faculty members. Dr. King, with the assistance of Mr. Julius Coles, Director of the Andrew Young Center for International Affairs, and Dr. Bryant Marks, Director of the Morehouse College Black Male Initiative, saw the potential of the project and played a pivotal role in making my vision a reality. Bridging the gap between classroom theories and field practices is no small feat, but under the auspices of the aforementioned mentors—and countless hours of research and planning—it all became possible.

The goal of establishing alternative learning environments—like our Alternative Spring Break—outside of the classroom is to provide each student-participant with the opportunity to engage different cultures and to apply and practice ethical leadership models in ways that make them lived experiences and not just theoretical. Alternative learning courses have the potential to become core components—alongside traditional leadership courses—of Leadership Studies programs. As shown by the recent and ongoing tragedy in Japan, there will always be a need for ethical, transformative, and participative leaders worldwide. Our Alternative Spring Break served as a precursor to what may one day be a course that trains scholars and practitioners to become global ethical leaders who will be ready to respond wherever there lies a need.

I believe that one of this project’s core strengths lay in the narrative talent of its participants. Each person has the ability to tell great stories about their relevant experiences that will ultimately motivate others to go out and serve their respective communities.

The following journal entries are my telling of the story of the first three days of our trip.

Journal Entry Day 1
All Around the World

With a scheduled departure time of 7:55AM onboard American Airlines flight 687 to Miami International Airport, the final pre-departure meeting had to be scheduled for 6:00AM. This early meeting time had many implications, but most importantly, it meant that all outstanding matters had to be taken care of during the late/early hours of March 3-4th. As the trip’s coordinator, I had to make sure that all participants had everything in place.
arriving in Haiti: We were black people coming to serve a neglected and misunderstood black nation. After collecting our supplies, one final challenge remained: clearing the notorious Haitian customs officers. After a heated dialogue with the commanding officer, I was able to convince him that we were bearing supplies that would benefit the Haitian people, and that none of them would be used for marketing purposes.

In the horizon, our bus and truck, along with my mother, awaited us. Upon loading the truck with our bags and supplies, and sitting in the air-conditioned bus, I could finally breathe and explain to everyone what, exactly, we were going to do for the next seven days.

Two and a half hours later, everyone was settled in at our beach house. Tomorrow, they will see one of the most beautiful sights in the country, a sunrise full of hope and joy rising over the Caribbean Sea.

**Journal Entry Day 2**

**Independence Has a Price**

As the team leader, I felt that a slow integration into Haitian culture for the group would be ideal, as opposed to an approach where participants would be immediately put to work. I believe that too often, relief and humanitarian workers become engaged in communities where they have very limited insights into the culture of the people they are supposed to be helping. How good is relief work without an in-depth understanding of the history and practices of the society? What are the real needs of the population, as opposed to surface wants and desires?

Many questions came to mind, but after a peaceful sunrise, I decided to let the team relax during the morning. Growing up in a country where you only have two economic classes, the *haves* and the *have-nots*, it can often pass without notice how fortunate one can be of his or her circumstances. Growing up, I always thought that every material thing you possess is temporary, but the human interactions and friendships that you create are for life. Grappling with my “silver spoon/dagger” complex, where kids who inherit a lot of wealth and power from their parents don’t reflect upon their social and economic responsibilities, I had to find a way to convey that message to a group of individuals who had no previous idea that such inherent differences existed in present-day Haiti.

I believe our first excursion to the nation’s city of independence, Gonaives, will help everyone get a better understanding of the roots that promote the economic division between the elite 5% and the bottom 95%. As we traveled, we discussed Haiti’s history from 1492 up to the 1830’s. Every participant got a better understanding of the pre-earthquake (January 12th 2010) Haiti. As the locale of the first successful slave rebellion, Haiti’s past is one plagued with social conflict, economic division, and political instability.

Upon arrival in Gonaives, we were greeted by a group of children. Dazed by the fact that we were people of color, they followed us everywhere, examining our every action. Walking around the national park of Gonaives, the team members asked very thought provoking questions. *Why two-hundred years later, is a country led by black revolutionaries is in this shape* [referring...
As we raced pass banana fields to make it back in time for the long awaited dinner, my eyes stumbled upon a circular shaped building filled with people. Although it didn’t catch anyone else’s attention, I notified the group that I had just seen a once in a lifetime opportunity that I thought they should experience. With no idea of what they were about to see, I instructed our driver to make a u-turn and park next to the circular-shaped structure. Once parked, I revealed to everyone that they were about to see an event that is very much a part of Haiti culture, a Coq fight, or Gagere in Creole. This was a shocking revelation to everyone but, embracing the culture, everyone—including the vegetarians—decided to partake of the bloody national pastime.

After an hour of heartfelt emotions, we congratulated the winning owner and embarked on our final ride home. Today has been a very eventful day, and each participant has seen some of Haiti’s culture that is often neglected.

Journal Entry Day 3
Tropical Paradise

After a long and productive first day, everyone was exhausted and grappling with all the information they had taken in over the course of just one day. From the income disparity to the social divide, the group could compare first-hand their own experiences in a relaxing beach environment as opposed to the many teenagers we saw roaming the National Highway looking for any source of income. There were so many possible activities to keep everyone’s mind active.

At our first debriefing session, everyone quickly shared their love and admiration for the people of Haiti. Noticing the aforementioned disparities, we turned our attention to finding possible solutions, among them, finding more efficient ways to connect people from the Haitian Diaspora, and other interested parties, to Haiti. With an orphanage and school established in 2004 right across the street from where we were staying, Trou-Baguette is a beach community that, among others, has the potential to become self-sufficient and sustainable. It can produce the next generation of Haiti’s leaders.

Everyone was then anxious to relax and enjoy the Caribbean weather. This was after all Spring Break! Minutes later, we were all in our bathing suits, enjoying the cloudless blue skies and warm Caribbean Sea.

After embracing this elite status life-style, it was time for us to truly understand how over eighty percent of Haitians live day-in and day-out. To do so, all it took was a short walk across National Highway #1 to the orphanage and school that we would be working closely with in the days ahead. Once at L’Ecole Bon Samaritain, each participant reacted at their own pace with the new environment they were confronted with.

Some immediately started interacting with the kids, trying to learn new Creole terms, showing them how to use their hi-tech digital cameras and cell-phones, how to play with a trumpet, or just play simple hand-to-hand games, while others simply sat back and tried to take in all the disturbing images that they were confronted with.

After understanding how similar our lives truly are, we all gathered around one of their classrooms to play our new song “Haiti.” “What it looks like? It looks like Haiti, ah. What it feels like? It feels like Haiti, ah.” Despite this joyous environment, many disturbing images still remained, but we made the most of our situation and decided to challenge the men to a soccer game. Since our opponents were all barefooted, we agreed that the stakes of the game would be the tennis shoes that we brought from the United States.

Despite losing 5-3, we were just as happy as if our team had won the World Cup. Our pure joy came from the fact that we not only got to play soccer against the community, most of us for the first time, but that we were also serving the people by allowing them to obtain tennis shoes in what was guaranteed to be a defeat from our end.

Then, we all headed back to our beach house to admire another breathtaking sunset and gaze upon the umbrella of stars that lit up the night. During our debriefing session around a campfire, we discussed our various emotions and thoughts, and possible solutions to the many problems that we witnessed during the day. Tomorrow, we will work under the hot Caribbean sun, making a difference in the lives of the children of Trou-Baguette, the future of Haiti.