Choosing One’s Own Demise: Autopsy of a Student-Led International Alternative Break

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Choosing One’s Own Demise: Autopsy of a Student-Led International Alternative Break

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from

The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

“Western development practitioners are increasingly aware that their own (institutional) cultures are partially responsible for development projects failing, due to a reluctance: to learn lessons from previous interventions; to hear, understand, value local perspectives and knowledge; to give up power; and to question the superiority of Western knowledge and experience.” (Schech et al. 2016: 149)

In recent years, “voluntourism” has become a hotly contested industry. Voluntourism organizations ask individuals from the Global North to use their excess time and money to visit countries in the Global South and participate in community development internationally for relatively short stints. Advocates suggest that voluntourism is not only a way to support communities but also a form of empathy building among those in the Global North for those in the Global South. However, in the past ten years, using the term “voluntourism” to describe international volunteer work reached both its height and demise. Google searches for the word climaxed in 2012 and have since been on a rapid decline. Today, voluntourism does not bring to mind the image of a cultured, well-rounded, altruistic individual but of a young, naïve, privileged, and usually White student posing with a small African child in their arms. The voluntourism industry has been indicted by hundreds of opinion pieces and academic articles that argue this practice produces more unintended harm than help for vulnerable communities and disproportionately benefits already privileged volunteers. Despite the criticism, the trend of international volunteering has not declined significantly, rather it has been rebranded.

“Alternative break” programs have been presented as a corrective to the problems posed by voluntourism. Rather than a traditional winter, spring, or summer break spent at home, travelling, or working, university students are asked to spend their time off constructively engaging in community development. Alternative break programs operate out of at least 250 participating universities (Break Away 2020). Alternative breaks claim to be different from
traditional voluntourist trips in that they require pre-trip education and emphasize “mutually beneficial partnerships” between students and communities. Mutually beneficial partnerships are horizontal relationships that require equal respect and participation to accomplish a specific goal. The language of mutually beneficial partnerships is positioned as a departure from the donor and recipient model utilized to justify neo-colonial liberalizing projects in the Global South where the Western student is the active donor and the impoverished community is the passive recipient. The hope of alternative breaks is that they not only have impacts in the communities they aid, but they also provide students with opportunities that may make them lifelong volunteers. This sentiment is reflected in the mission statement of Break Away, the national alternative break organization, to create a “society of active citizens” or people for whom “community is the priority in their values and life choices” (Break Away 2020).

Alternative breaks and their emphasis on mutually beneficial partnerships offer universities and students a method of reconciling the consequences of voluntourism with the growing pressure to be globally competitive in the context of neoliberalism. Indeed, each of the top 100 national universities listed by U.S. News & World Report in 2020 offer robust international volunteer opportunities, and the majority have a separate office related to community engagement. To maintain their elite profile, universities are focused on graduating global citizens who have learned to both compete and participate in a world shaped by globalization. Similarly, for students, while service may be understood as helping another person, today, involvement in service has become a crucial part of a student’s CV. In our increasingly neoliberal society, community service has become an industry and individuals and universities engage in service because it is a way to demonstrate their worth.
Indeed, William & Mary—the university this study focuses on—epitomizes this profile. William & Mary is a medium-sized university of around 6500 undergraduate students. The university is considered a ‘public ivy’ and liberal arts research institution. In the competition to attract the best students, William & Mary presents itself as the university for service-minded students, as is evident in its vision statement: “people come to William & Mary wanting to understand and change the world – and together we do” (W&M 2019). William & Mary students pride themselves on their characterization as passionate and ambitious. The school boasts that 80% of undergraduates have participated in some form of mentored research with a faculty member (W&M 2020). William & Mary is also noted for its lack of socio-economic diversity. The university has one of the lowest percentages of students receiving Pell Grants nationwide and has the lowest percentage in the state of Virginia (Martell 2016; Fearing 2019). According to the New York Times (2017), 73% of William & Mary students’ families fall in the top 20% of all American incomes. The ethnic diversity of William & Mary is average for the United States with a 2023 class profile of approximately 55% White students (W&M 2020). As ambitious, passionate, upper-middle class, mostly White students, with an abundance of institutional support, William & Mary undergraduates are eager volunteers. The university is often listed among the top ten schools in which most students are involved in community service, and for the past 11 consecutive years, it has been named one of the top volunteer producing schools for the Peace Corps (Princeton Review 2020; Zagursky 2019).

Given this profile of William & Mary and its average student, the trajectory of international alternative break programs on campus presents a puzzling phenomenon. After an initial wave of interest and deep commitment to alternative break programs, William & Mary students chose to end the international community partnerships they built, despite being
incentivized and rewarded by their university, peers, and future employers to sustain these partnerships. This leads us to a critical research question: why would a group of students opt for organizational demise?

To explore this question, I bring together insights from post-colonial critiques of development and the literature on organizational legitimacy. With these theoretical tools, I explore the case study of a seven-year partnership between the Student Partnership for Aid and International Development (SPAID), originally Student Partnership for International Medical Aid (SPIMA), and a rural community in the Volta Region of Ghana. SPAID operated from the campus of William & Mary as one of Break Away’s Branch Out Alternative Breaks. From 2011 to 2018, SPAID partnered with the community to build a public latrine, a latrine for a primary school, a maternity ward addition to the clinic, and an almost completed school building. Despite what many may consider a laudable record of success, in early 2019, students came to the difficult decision to end this relationship.

Based on my analysis, I argue that students chose to end their international partnership and to facilitate their organization’s demise as a result of grappling with the tensions inherent in international alternative break programs. These programs and the concept of mutually beneficial partnerships train students in critical perspectives on international development, and yet some of their modernizing assumptions, as well as the institutional conditions under which they operate, frustrate the realization of this critique in practice. Facing this tension, students chose to end their partnership after concluding that international alternative breaks are incompatible with the ideal of equity that originally attracted students to and was cultivated by the program itself.
The Anti-Politics Machine and the Failure of Good Intentions

Sociologist James Ferguson’s work on the anti-politics machine is a useful starting point for understanding how well-intentioned individuals—like passionate, eager students—could fail in their goals to help communities in the Global South, and, when they do inevitably fail, why they continue. Ferguson (1990) studied rural development projects in Lesotho that consistently failed to meet their benchmarks or prove achievement of any stated goal, and yet hundreds of organizations continued to contrive projects throughout the state and were still welcomed back. Lesotho is not the only arena; these projects could be found “scattered liberally across the African continent and beyond,” and in almost every case, Ferguson (1990: 9) argues, “these projects seem to ‘fail’ with almost the same astonishing regularity that they do in Lesotho.”

The answers to why these ineffectual organizations persist, he argued, could be found in the “development discourse.” Following Foucault (1979), Ferguson (1990) understands discourses as careful statements made by experts whose claims to the truth are governed by particular institutional rules, procedures, and conditions (see also: Escobar 1995). Discourses are ways of thinking and producing meaning that do not simply relay reality but create it. Ferguson describes the development discourse as the special language, and therefore reality, produced by development practitioners who deploy discourse as a means of sustaining their mission under the institutional conditions they operate within. Development discourse constructs the image of a country receptive to and in need of development aid. However, these discourses tend not to describe the reality of the country’s situation but rather reflect the institutional conditions under which development organizations operate. Development organizations need to provide rapid, quantifiable results for donors (or student fundraisers) to maintain their position. Development organizations need to be perceived as “apolitical” so they are not a threat to the host government
and so they can keep the government as a potential scapegoat for when projects fail (Ferguson 1994: 177). Under these conditions, development practitioners construct a development discourse that identifies standard problems that can be solved quickly using technical—not political—solutions. As a result, the solutions neglect the structural problems which lie at the root of these issues. Ferguson refers to this as the “anti-politics machine” which seemingly suspends “politics” from the most sensitive political operations, making political decisions about the allocation of resources appear to be technical solutions to technical problems (Ferguson 1994: 180). Under the operation of the anti-politics machine, development fails but development organizations still implement quantifiable projects (e.g. number of latrines and schools built) that allow them to claim success and persist as an organization. For Ferguson, there is no mystery as to why these projects continue to replicate with the same outcomes, despite that they so often fail to help the poor. Ferguson (1990: 256) argues that they do “successfully help to accomplish important strategic tasks” even “behind the backs of the most sincere participants.”

The modernization paradigm heavily influenced the development discourse that dominated the industry in the 1970s. This paradigm came to gain worldwide influence as President John F. Kennedy declared the 1960s the “Development Decade” (UNICEF). Toward that goal, Kennedy facilitated the conception of several foreign aid organizations that exist today, most notably, the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In his inaugural speech, Kennedy (1961) issued a promise, “to those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves.” To support this work, Kennedy hired W.W. Rostow as a political advisor who also went on to serve under President Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1960, Rostow authored *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, in which he argued that development
occurs in a stepwise fashion and that underdeveloped countries can be aided by more modern nations to complete the steps. Rostow’s theory exemplifies the modernization perspective on development and aid.

Modernization theory describes the movement of countries from a traditional society to a modern one. Rostow (1960) suggests there are six stages of economic growth and to pass into the next stage, a society must meet specific technical benchmarks such as: development of commercial agriculture for export, increased urbanization and industrialization, diversified industry, developed transportation infrastructure, etc. Each of these were said to reflect the steps that led to the industrial revolution and modernization of countries in the Global North. Modernization theory methods sought to ameliorate issues facing countries in the Global South with one-size-fits-all, technical solutions. By casting development as this set of technical steps to implement, the anti-politics machine is achieved. The politics that created the inequalities between the Global North and South—colonialism, imperialism, and the perpetuation of racist imagery—are erased as the structural roots of a country’s development problems (Ferguson 1990; Frank 1966; Fanon 1961). Modernization theory deliberately omits the step of colonialism that many countries in the Global North used to advance their ‘modernization’ process (Frank 1966). Modernization theory is orchestrated by donors (or volunteers) who are positioned as beneficent experts, and recipients are the passive underdeveloped communities in the Global South who can do nothing but wait for their saviors from more developed, modern countries (Escobar 1995). With donors and recipients, the failure of a project can be placed on those who refuse to “receive” or on governments that fail to properly implement the “right” policies.

While modernization theory in practice was a clear tool of the Cold War, its paradigmatic assumptions and structure remain in many of the organizations created during the “Development
Decade” and still shape the development discourse. Both Kennedy and Rostow’s hope for foreign aid was that it would implicitly help in the fight against communism. Communities receiving aid and building relationships with Western, capitalist actors, would be co-opted rather than coerced to reject communism and actively participate in the liberalization of their economies and the “modernization” (read: Americanization) of their society. The anti-politics machine obfuscates the political intentions of development work because it is a product of the soft power propaganda machine of the 1960s. Ferguson (1994: 180) asked, “what do aid programs do besides fail to help poor people?” and found the answer of, “politics.” Neither the government of countries, nor the aid organizations and their associated development projects are impartial or apolitical; they do not simply exist to provide social services and promote economic growth.

The mechanisms of the anti-politics machine were first introduced with the modernization school during the Cold War but were repurposed to serve the needs of neoliberal policies. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), organizations created to establish the rules and standards of free trade among countries in the Global North, utilize the anti-politics machine to pursue neoliberal interventions through structural-adjustment programs (SAPs) in the Global South (Lensink 1996). SAPs are conditional loans, provided to the governments of countries that are struggling economically, that require the adoption of neoliberal policies like liberalization and privatization (see: IMF 1999). These neoliberal institutions construct and define the concept of “less developed countries” and determine in their own terms what problems these countries face (see: World Bank 2015). Büscher (2010: 34) argues that neoliberal projects aim to “establish a world where all social and political dynamics are subjected to market dynamics such as commodification and competition.” The “aid” that is provided
through SAPs comes with the conditions like austerity measures, privatization, and liberalization of investment and trade in support of free market exchange with the Global North. SAPs reproduce neo-colonial connections between countries, allowing the Global North to extract resources and labor from the Global South at subsidized prices and sell back manufactured products to these countries at inflated prices. Through the anti-politics machine, SAPs do not fix the economic issues that brought countries to ask the World Bank and IMF for loans, instead they continue to ignore and exacerbate the structural inequalities created by colonialism.

**From Voluntourism to Alternative Breaks: Rejecting the Anti-Politics Machine?**

Ferguson’s argument proves useful in understanding why voluntourism projects fail and yet persist. Rather than just encouraging individuals to visit and spend their money in countries in the Global South, voluntourism asks tourists to travel and spend a portion of their time engaged in service with the people and communities of the country they are visiting (McGehee and Santos 2005). However, prevailing critiques of voluntourism reveal the operation of the anti-politics machine. Like regular tourism, voluntourism is billed as a technical, apolitical solution to development problems—as an “essential component of both economic development and poverty reduction” (Scheyvens 2011). But neither voluntourism nor regular tourism occur in a sociocultural vacuum. Where people go and what they choose to spend their money on in different countries is influenced by a variety of economic and social factors. Changes in trends can leave the fate of communities that benefit from the income of voluntourism up to the whims of popular opinion. On the national scale, the distribution of the benefits from tourism is often skewed towards the already privileged class of a country in the Global South, and voluntourism may also end up catering to elites in communities (Scheyvens 2011). At its worst, voluntourism fits exactly into Ferguson’s critique of the modernization development discourse: it perpetuates
the idea that people from high income countries are the sole agents of change who hold all the answers to solving development problems while also failing to recognize the role of high-income countries in creating and/or exacerbating these very same problems (McLennan 2014: 167).

While voluntourism persists, despite its failures, scholarly critique has also contributed to the construction of an alternative to the modernization development discourse that seeks to escape the anti-politics machine in student international volunteer programs. Scholars and practitioners have crafted a development discourse rooted in the concept of a “mutually beneficial partnership” that should guide students and other volunteers as they embark on “alternative breaks” to aid communities in the South. Mutually beneficial partnerships (MBP) are horizontal partnerships between two entities that emphasize mutual learning, respect, and participation in order to accomplish a specific goal agreed upon by these entities. The alternative break model attempts to construct a framework—a new development discourse—that overcomes some of the pitfalls of the modernization development discourse that Ferguson identifies.

First, the new development discourse of mutually beneficial partnerships challenges the expert-recipient model established by the modernization development discourse (Schech et. al. 2016; Scheyvens 2011). International volunteer programs are often seen as “legitimiz[ing] the validity of young unskilled international labor as a development solution” (Simpson 2004: 682). Rather than constructing volunteers as “experts able to achieve change,” the new discourse casts the goal of community development as supporting the agency of communities in the Global South, or the “capacity of people to order their world, the capacity to create, reproduce, change, and live according to their own meaning systems, to have the power to define themselves as opposed to being defined by others” (Bhattacharyya 2004: 12). In contrast to modernization, MBP recognizes that students also take from the service experience, they are not simply donors.
Students have the opportunity to learn from and build relationships with communities. Community members gain the same learning opportunity and relationship building, as well as the benefits of a completed project once volunteers have left. Volunteers are “developing cooperation” rather than “giving aid” (Schaaf 2015: 69). As an intentional departure from the donor and recipient model of modernization theory, MBPs view solidarity, capacity building, and self-determination as required for community development.

Second, the new development discourse of mutually beneficial partnerships takes aim at another major critique of voluntourism: that volunteers are well-intentioned but under-educated. As Hutnyk (1996: 44) notes, for many volunteers, “questions of cultural hegemony, international and class privilege, and the extent of relative economic advantage are, at best, understood in a vague, not an analytical, way” (Hutnyk 1996: 44). In response, alternative break programs have differentiated themselves by implementing more education and self-reflection, even including the following quote in training materials: “Global educators… must face the uncomfortable fact that there’s one thing worse than not sending students abroad… it’s sending immature, ill prepared and myopic students whose presence in an overseas community affect more harm than good” (Slimbach 2010: 43).

MBP instead focuses on mutual learning as it “provides for a richer cultural exchange and opportunities for cross-cultural understanding that would not be available on conventional trips” (Scheyvens 2011: 98). Educational voluntourism goes beyond the voyeurism of slum tours and narrated trips to poor neighborhoods but encourages a connection and individual relationship building between volunteers and community members. As McGehee and Andereck (2008:20) point out, “many volunteer tourism organizations cite the interactions between volunteers and their hosts as perhaps the most vital component of the volunteer tourism experience for both
parties.” Widening the world view of their volunteers is the stated purpose of many organizations (Raymond and Hall 2008: 530).

Prior to alternative breaks, the theory of voluntourism argued that simply having contact with the ‘other’ can prove to be a transformative life experience for a volunteer (Raymond, 2008: 54). The new development discourse, in contrast, insists that cross-cultural understanding needs to be intentionally cultivated and carefully planned and seen as a “goal of volunteer tourism rather than a natural result of sending volunteers overseas” (Raymond and Hall, 2008: 530). Alternative breaks attempt to include more educational components and encourage reflection so that a volunteer can think critically about the work they are doing in a community. This includes reflection on the structural issues that the modernization development discourse eschews.

Sewpaul (2006: 327), for example, argues that breaks should help students “learn from the wisdom of people in other countries; understand better the complex position of their country of origin within the world; and reflect upon its foreign policy impact on less powerful countries.” Ultimately, the goal is that a more critical approach will foster broader social action and lead to “greater involvement of volunteers in social movements in the long term,” becoming “lifelong agent[s] of change” (Scheyvens 2011: 98; McGehee and Santos 2005: 764; see also McGehee and Andereck 2008).

Finally, within alternative breaks, the focus is on capacity building, or creating projects with the goal of empowering a community and supporting their agency. Alternative breaks critique voluntourism as unsustainable because these trips have the tendency to ‘reproduce dependency,’ or damage a community’s agency by encouraging their reliance on the power of foreign volunteers (Bhattacharya 2004; McGehee and Andereck 2008: 19; McLennan 2014). Alternative break volunteers strive instead to foster the agency of their community partner.
Western volunteers are taught to see communities in the Global South as agents of change rather than “abjed recipients” (Bhattacharyya, 2004: 13).

At first glance, the new development discourse of the mutually beneficial partnership seems like a less obvious fit for Ferguson’s explanation for development project failure, compared to the traditional voluntourism model. It seems to challenge both the assumptions of modernization theory and the anti-politics machine. Alternative breaks specifically seek to address many of the problems that Ferguson points to and embraces to a degree an understanding of “development” as patterned by political struggles and structural injustices rather than produced through technical, apolitical interventions.

However, upon closer examination, both the assumptions of modernization theory and the workings of the anti-politics machine continue to operate. In theory, MBPs promote collective ownership of projects so that all work is collaborative. In practice, volunteers hope to preserve the sustainability of their projects by developing the ‘capacity’ of the community. Volunteers see themselves as transferring hard and soft skills so that, once volunteers leave, community members can carry on the work without them. Although alternative breaks position “capacity-building” as an improvement on problematic older forms of voluntourism, it still encourages a hierarchy of knowledge and ability. The language of transferring skills still positions volunteers as experts with power and knowledge over a community, when, in reality, it is most often the case that community members have the necessary skills to complete a project, while students can help catalyze the start of a project by providing money rather than offer skills. Indeed, Schech et al. (2016: 154) warn that “unless managed carefully, capacity development can perpetuate neo-colonial perspectives of donors and recipients” and Schaaf (2015: 71) raises the
question of whether these partnerships are possible between organizations or individual with historic power differences.

Similarly, this new development discourse challenges the donor-recipient model and instead constructs communities in the Global South as partners. Yet, the community’s agency is seen as hampered by volunteers who work in a community “too long” or “too often” such that the community becomes reliant on their aid and will not be able to fend for themselves once the volunteers leave (McLennan 2014). This concern with cultivating dependency through aid work is pervasive in the development literature and in the discourse of mutually beneficial partnerships. Yet this discourse of dependency reproduces the image of the “abject recipient” and ignores the structural dynamics that generated historical inequities. Indeed, the notion that communities in the Global South depend on development projects and aid organizations is an interesting reversal of the historical and current dependency relationships between countries in the Global North that benefit from the exploitation of natural resources and underpaid laborers of the Global South.

Moreover, Ferguson’s argument about organizational failure yet persistence rings true when we consider the institutional conditions that continue to constrain the ability for alternative breaks to address the structural, political problems that their volunteers study. Volunteers may be well-intentioned and well-educated on these topics, but, within an alternative break, they cannot hope to tackle root causes. Alternative breaks are still designed to fit the student volunteers’ needs first and the communities’ second. Alternative breaks inherently cater to student needs and interests. The alternative break model is based around students’ schedules that only allow participation in short term programs during the weekend, spring or winter break, or a few weeks in their summer vacation. This schedule does not consider when it may be most helpful or even
possible for a non-profit or community partner to accommodate a group of 10 to 15 volunteers. Alternative breaks were conceived as a way to get college students off beaches and out of bars during their spring break and instead do something constructive and educational. While a great amount of pre-trip education on cultural humility and the critiques of voluntourism are included in alternative break programs, the model does not necessarily work when translated to international volunteering. Students fundraise for these programs by writing grants with the quantifiable goals for what they will accomplish. Given the high turnover of students from year to year, projects are chosen for their expedience and feasibility. Even if volunteers understand structural issues, their institutional context forces them to construct interventions that they are capable of implementing, which end up looking very similar to the technical solutions of modernization-inspired voluntourism. The anti-politics machine is reproduced. While alternative breaks fail to help those in need of aid, student volunteers gain long-term positive impacts from their involvement in international development projects. Yet, while attention to the institutional conditions of volunteer projects helps us understand why alternative break organizations continue to fail despite their more informed critiques, it still does not help us understand why an organization would choose to facilitate its demise given the organizational and institutional incentives to survive.

**Quitting Failure**

The anti-politics machine facilitates the failure of projects executed under the new alternative break paradigm, but the new development discourse of mutually beneficial partnerships also presents new challenges to Ferguson’s theory. Ferguson argued that the modernization development discourse constructs a reality that maintains the legitimacy of development organizations. Despite their failures, development discourse allows them to claim
success and persist. But a more critical development discourse opens the possibility for alternative organizational trajectories.

Here I draw insights from the literature on organizational legitimacy. Suchman (1995: 574) defines legitimacy as the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” While legitimacy may stem from multiple sources, I focus on what Suchman (1995: 579) terms moral legitimacy, or “whether the activity effectively promotes societal welfare, as defined by the audience's socially constructed value system.” The audience decides if an organization is morally legitimate and therefore decides if the organization survives. The most consequential members of the audience are those who fund it and those who support it with their time and energy—in this case, the student volunteers. The audience judges moral legitimacy by evaluating the outputs, consequences, techniques, and procedures of the organization (Suchman 1995: 579). In Ferguson’s discussion of legitimacy, his focus follows the definition provided by Maurer (1971: 361): “the process whereby an organization justifies to a peer or superordinate system its right to exist.” Ferguson does not address how the development discourse protects the survival of an organization if the members of the organization itself do not find it legitimate.

Alternative break programs may be viewed as legitimate by their superordinate institutions, funders, and the volunteers’ peer groups, but can the program survive without members accepting the moral legitimacy of their organization? Legitimacy may be resilient to particular adverse events, but overall, it is dependent on a history of events (Suchman 1995: 574). Volunteers well-versed in the critiques of voluntourism may join an alternative break organization with excitement and may be satisfied with surface-level benefits provided to
communities for some time as they work towards longer term change. But, when volunteers are trained to be critical of short-term, ‘band-aid’ solutions, they will begin to question the legitimacy of the organization when their efforts to make long-term, sustainable change are frustrated by institutional conditions that do not allow them to address structural roots of development problems. If the “history of events” in the organization reveals itself over time to be a reproduction of the very technical, apolitical voluntourist models that the volunteers were taught to critique, their support for the organization may waver. Indeed, rather than claim success by pointing to the quantitative results of their technical solutions, as Ferguson demonstrates many development organizations are wont to do, these more critical volunteers may instead indict the moral illegitimacy of the organization and choose instead its demise.

This does not mean that volunteers who choose organizational demise over persistence are moral superiors to the practitioners that Ferguson studied, nor that they are more willing to suffer the personal cost associated with admitting failure. Some volunteers grow frustrated with their inability to make long-lasting change. Given their relatively deep understanding of structural problems, they indict the organization—and themselves—for moral illegitimacy and choose organizational demise on theoretical principles. Other students who have been influenced by the more critical development discourse yet nonetheless implicitly accept some of the modernization assumptions that are prevalent in development theory. These volunteers question the legitimacy of the organization for its inability to transcend ‘band-aid’ solutions; however, they still fall back onto the assumption that individuals in the Global South lack autonomy or power and ultimately blame both the community itself and the organization for its inability to help community members out of this agentless state. This belief still supported the choice of organizational demise but also reproduced the problematic assumptions of modernization theory.
rather than identifying failure in the institutional conditions of these types of limited interventions. But modernization assumptions are so extraordinarily pervasive, that even volunteers who made clear critical indictments of modernization, still latently accepted its tenets.

**Methodological Approach**

To explore the dynamics of the anti-politics machine, organizational legitimacy and demise, I conducted qualitative research on the case of SPAID, a student-led alternative break organization at William & Mary. I chose this case study in part because of my familiarity with the organization and my personal participation in the program. I was a participant in SPAID beginning the fall of 2016 and co-led the organization from the summer of 2017 to 2018 and helped advise until the organization’s demise in late in 2018. From the spring of 2018 to spring 2019, I worked for the organization that oversaw SPIMA/SPAID, Branch Out Alternative Breaks. I did not enter SPAID my first year of college with the intention to eventually do an analysis of the organization. Yet, I cannot divorce my experience from my examination of the organization, nor do I believe I should. My perspective as a participant, leader, and advisor have given me a deep understanding of the language, assumptions, and goals of my target population as I learned it from them and with them.

To study these dynamics within SPAID, I collected and analyzed two main types of data: semi-structured interviews and primary documents, including meeting minutes, training manuals, budget reports etc. from the organization. First, I conducted 16 interviews; 15 with former participants and leaders of SPIMA/SPAID and one with a former employee of the Office of Community Engagement who helped advise the organization. Two respondents were interviewed in-person and in my home as was requested by the respondents. I interviewed the rest over the phone; while in-person would have been preferred for all, interviewees were usually in a
different state or county which made this option impossible. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours with the average length being an hour and were audio-recorded. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, I have given each a pseudonym and I cite them by interview number. Wherever possible, I eliminated any identifying information so that only the respondent should be able to identify themselves by their own comments. I also chose to protect the identity of our partner community and partner NGO.

For the interviews, I used a theoretically informed, networking sampling strategy. To find respondents I received help from the director of the Office of Community Engagement who emailed a list of 61 students who had participated in or led SPIMA/SPAID. Respondents self-selected into the study by emailing me indicating their interest. The nature of this sampling style likely lent itself to those who had stronger opinions, either positive or negative, on their experiences with SPIMA/SPAID. I then asked respondents to reach out to fellow participants from their cohort year on my behalf and sent out a second interview request to people whose contact information I already had. While I made efforts to include respondents from each year that SPIMA/SPAID existed, my relationship to those who were in the most recent cohorts resulted in a greater representation of participants and leaders from 2016, 2017, and 2018. For 2011-2018, during SPIMA/SPAID’s primary partnership, I had at least one respondent for each year except 2013. There were also respondents from the years before the primary partnership, 2008-2010. I also had an overrepresentation of leaders to participants (nine compared to six). This is natural given the self-selection method; people who were more invested in the program during their college career are more likely to re-engage with it after graduation. I think these leaders give a greater perspective on the organization as they participated in SPIMA/SPAID for more than one year, and they had the opportunity to view the program both as a member and an
administrator. Moreover, they were more influential in decisions about organizational survival or demise.

The demographics of my sample are very similar to the population. The sample overrepresents White women compared to the general United States population, but they are representative of the demographics of the organization. 47 out of 61 volunteers, or 77%, identified as White and 13 of 16 respondents, 81%, identified as White. I was only able to interview two men and I cannot measure if this is representative of the population. Although I know that 27 of the 61 are women and 11 men, I do not know the gender of 23 of the 61 individuals. I also understand that men are underrepresented in the William & Mary alternative break program (Brown 2020).

The second type of data I collected was an array of primary documents created by the organization. This included files about financing, notes from meetings with participants, leaders, professors, and the partner NGO, and some survey and interview data of the community partner, all of which were available in a Google Drive with documents from 2011 onward. I read every document in these files, which provided useful data on the history of the organization, participants’ understanding of different development concepts and ideas, and previous participants’ and leaders’ plans for the organization. This Drive was invaluable to my work, it gave me an accurate chronicle of events, helped me validate previously only anecdotal information, and gave me descriptive data on the intentions, desires and hopes volunteers had for their work over the years of the program.

The data collected from interviews and document analysis was transcribed and coded. While I tried to include as many of the themes and trends that emerged from my analysis of the coded data, the following is not an exhaustive report of my findings. The quotes I chose to
include were ones that articulated the views of multiple participants. I selected those that were most succinct or expressive, and I make it clear where a quote reflects the unique views or opinions of a respondent.

**Ghana & The Anti-Politics Machine**

On March 6, 1957, Ghana ended almost a century of British colonial rule, becoming the first West African country to declare independence. The country’s first President and Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, understood the charade of the US’ modernization paradigm that was presented as a technical model for development while masking the deep power inequalities in the global economy that persisted after independence, as well as the Cold War competition for global influence. President Nkrumah planned to demonstrate to the world the power of Africans to “conduct their own affairs with efficiency and tolerance and through the exercise of democracy” (Bourret 1949: 202). As a strong proponent of Pan-Africanism, he was the first African head of state to call for unity across the African diaspora including the Caribbean, North and South America (Legum 1965). His dream of solidarity among marginalized peoples is exemplified with his founding membership in the Non-Aligned Movement (Gupta and Shahid 1981). The Non-Aligned Movement is an organization of countries in the Global South that stood against Western cultural, political, and economic hegemony and refused to serve as pawns in the Cold War rivalry. Nkrumah was also a founding architect of “African socialism,” or a rejection of capitalism in favor of afro-centric communalism (Friedland and Rosberg 1964). Nkrumah’s policies and plans for the future of Ghana, and Africa as a whole, sought to divest from global capitalism in favor of a diverse economy that conforms to and best accommodates the country of origin rather than corporations from the Global North. Nkrumah’s ideas and plans for an anti-capitalist, united Africa in the heat of the Cold War were considered radical and
dangerous to the Global North. In a plot aided and possibly instigated by the C.I.A, Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966 while on a visit to North Vietnam (Hersh, 1978). Still in exile from the country, Nkrumah died only six years later. Following his ousting and eventual death, Ghana went through a period of unrest with a series of military and civilian governments and multiple coups, until the eventual ascension of the Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings in 1981.

While Nkrumah had attempted to circumvent the anti-politics machine through socialist policies and the Non-Aligned Movement, Rawlings embraced its reincarnation through neoliberal policies. In 1983, Rawlings’ party, the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC), abandoned socialism in favor of neoliberal structural adjustment programs (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 46). Between 1983 and 1992, Ghana implemented six IMF reform packages with the main features of pursuing “labor retrenchment, trade liberalization and devaluation, subsidy withdrawal, and an increase in user fees” (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 49). These goals advanced the neoliberal agenda to shift the role of the state away from being the provider of welfare to that of quality assurer and to focus on strengthening the market and exchange (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000: 479).

The neoliberal policies implemented through the SAPs were presented as technical solutions that would help Ghana compete in a global marketplace. Initially, Ghana experienced a drastic economic change in the wake of SAP implementation. The country increased its industrial capacity from approximately 25% in the 1970’s to 46% in the 1980s (Hutchful, 2002: 58). From the early 1980s to the early 1990s, Ghana’s gross national investment (GNI) rose from 3.7% to 16% and inflation decreased from an annual rate of 73% to 13% (Hutchful, 2002: 57). Per capita income rose by 2.6% (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 46). By these measures, SAPs were a success in Ghana as they helped the country out of economic crisis and increased the growth
indicators of production, income, and investment. In the view of the World Bank and the IMF, development is synonymous with national economic growth, and Ghana was held up as an exemplar of SAP success (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001: 36; Toye 1991: 155).

However, the seeming success of these “technical” interventions neglect the politics of development. For example, of the total funds loaned to Ghana through SAPs, 37.1% were earmarked for the improvement of roads and train networks, and the improvement of infrastructure allowed for better access to Ghana’s natural resources (Anyinam, 1994: 452). After SAP implementation, Ghana increased its export volume. Initially, there was a sharp increase in its mono-crop, cocoa, but then this declined and gave way to an increase in gold mining (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 51). Yet, these metrics of success, such as investment and exports, ignored the distributive effects of these policies, particularly across the rural-urban divide. In 1987, farmers from Ashanti villages close to the coast and the capital city of Accra received 94% of the gross cocoa income compared to farmers across the nation (Kraus, 1991: 26). Rural communities near the mines experienced negative impacts to their health because of environmental degradation, while Ghanaian mining companies operating out of urban areas received the bulk of the benefit (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 51).

Indeed, deepening inequalities between elites and the poorer segments of the population, and between rural and urban areas, were masked by anti-politics mechanisms of the neoliberal SAPs. Poverty in Ghana was greater following the implementation of SAPs than before (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001: 31). The Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, for Ghana has been on the rise since the 1980s; in 1986, Ghana had a Gini coefficient of 35.3 compared to a 2012 Gini of 42.4 (World Bank). The gap between the poorest 10% and the richest 10% has widened, with the richest consuming 6.8 times the amount of the poorest (Cooke, 2016: 2). The
inequality divide is most apparent when comparing rural and urban areas. Households in urban areas have an average poverty rate of 10.6% where rural areas have an average poverty rate of 37.9% and this gap is still widening as the urban poverty rate continues to drop much faster than the rural rate (Cooke, 2016: 1). In the first three years of SAP implementation, Ghana did receive a real minimum wage increase of 75% but given the severe disparity between those in rural and urban areas, it can be inferred that much of this gain went to benefit those in urban regions and not the country overall (Anyinam, 1994: 455). Those in rural areas also experienced an increase in joblessness following SAP implementation as a result of the retrenchment of labor policies. At the beginning of 1990, between 140,000 and 150,000 workers had lost their jobs and the Ghanaian Trade Union Congress (TUC) estimated that they had lost close to 200,000 members through retrenchment (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 51).

Privatization was also heralded by SAPs as a technical solution that would increase competition and consumer access in the market, but in practice it deepened inequalities. After the implementation of SAPs, water and electricity were privatized under the free market ethos of the World Bank and the IMF. The rates for water access increased between 150% to 11,150%, electricity by 47% to 80% and health fees by 800% to 1,000% (Anyinam, 1994: 455). Increased user fees made health services and clean water unaffordable to the average worker and to many individuals in rural areas (Boafo-Arthur, 1999: 49). The decreased access to clean water had very real consequences to the public health of Ghana. Before SAPs, Ghana had nearly eradicated the Guinea Worm, which is spread through individuals drinking and collecting unclean water. The increase in rates for clean water corresponded with a drastic increase in the incidence of Guinea Worm in poor, rural communities (Manji and Patrick Burnett, 2005: 166).
Similar trends emerged in the education and health sectors. After independence, Ghana’s education and health care policies were fairly universalist, providing free health care and education until the early 1980s (Abukari, 2015: 1). After SAP implementation, parents had to share the cost of sending their children to pre-tertiary school. The immediate effects of this policy were primary school enrollments dropping. Between 1980 and 1988 there was a 4.22 percent decrease in primary school enrollments (Abukari, 2015: 2). In the 1980s, because of cutbacks on government expenditure and rising user-fees for healthcare, the Rawlings administration started a policy that was referred to as “Cash and Carry.” This policy required that hospitals take an out-of-pocket payment in cash before any services were administered to the patient (Abukari, 2015: 2). The introduction of fees discouraged many Ghanaians from accessing care they were once able to receive free of charge. In just one year, 1985 to 1986, outpatient health services fell nearly 50% (Abukari, 2015: 6).

In 2003, the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) was introduced and began repairing some of the damage of SAPs. The NHIS provides almost universal health care to citizens who apply. It is paid for through the Value-Added Tax and is considered a “pro-poor” policy, as most taxed goods are sold in urban areas while those in rural areas participate more in the informal economy. Although there are still some logistical barriers to entry that make it more difficult for rural citizens to sign up or maintain their insurance, this is a vastly different policy from “Cash and Carry” and is a departure from the neoliberal recommendations. In 1957 Ghana enacted Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) but it did not become a reality until it was re-enacted in 1996. Rural schools still suffer from dilapidated buildings and lack of teachers, but enrollment has been increasing in rural areas since the decline in the SAP era (Abukari, 2015: 5).
In short, SAPs helped Ghana increase its ability to industrialize and improve infrastructure, but these improvements were made to the detriment of other resources. Although Ghana experienced an increase in GNI and GDP per capita with the implementation of neoliberal policies, it was at the expense of an increase in joblessness and inequality. While many urban areas of Ghana have benefited in some ways from neoliberal intervention, they have done so at a rate that is disproportionate to the greater rural areas. Ghana’s economic reform was financed by more than six billion dollars in loans from the World Bank (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001: 7). As of 2001, Ghana was the 41st most indebted country in the world and the majority of this debt was accrued during its SAP era (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001: 25). In the 1980s, Ghana was spending four times more on re-paying debt than it was on health care, which is part of the austerity measures that had negative impacts for the health of poor, rural people (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001: 26). The IMF, World Bank and other multi-lateral organizations in the Global North received more than 70% of Ghana’s external debt payments (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001: 27). These Western countries profited from Ghana’s exports, the sale of overpriced manufactured goods, and payments on debt that they constructed. This was done at the intentional expense of the citizens of Ghana and the effect was masked by the anti-politics machine.

A Conventional Paradigm of Success

In the wake of this political and economic climate established by the neoliberal anti-politics machine, SPIMA launched an alternative break in 2008 with the goal of addressing disparities in rural and urban health. The rural community that William & Mary students partnered with is cut in two by one main dirt road that stitches together all eight villages in the region. Approximately 900 individuals, adults and children, live in the community and most sustain themselves as farmers. The common food crops in the region are okra, cassava, maize,
beans and peppers. A daily meal for many families is fufuo, a dish made of pounded cassava, and banku, made of pounded maize, accompanied by a soup or light stew and rice or meat. Some farmers also cultivate cash crops such as shallot, tomato, peppers, cassava, and maize. I am unsure what portion of the community grows cash crops over subsistence crops or if most grow both. Other members of the community are pastors, carpenters, masons, tailors, seamstresses, market vendors, teachers, and a few nurses who are employed at the clinic. Many community members aged 16-35 live and work in cities nearby and send money home to elderly family members.

The three largest buildings in the community are the primary school, the church, and the house owned by a hotelier that student volunteers eventually made their home. Most children in the community attend school, but some are unable because their parents cannot afford the necessary uniform or school supplies. There is another primary school a few miles from the community that some children walk to daily. The church is usually full on Sundays with two services spanning the whole day. Many community members travel to nearby villages to visit the church of their preference instead. On weekdays, the church serves as an indoor gathering place. Most families live in homes they built themselves or their parents or grandparents built. Often several generations of a family live clustered around a small courtyard and a room for each person is built beneath a large portico. Kitchens and laundry rooms are outdoors. Goats, cats, and chickens are free to roam, each family knows which animal belongs to who.

Community members are generally welcoming and hospitable to William & Mary students. They offer volunteers a place to sit in their homes, bags of potable water, and upon arrival and departure of volunteers a borbabor (dance party) is performed. Most members of the community are accustomed to the presence of Western volunteers, not just our group but the
U.N., Rotary International, and other organizations have been in and out of the community for longer than SPIMA/SPAID. A few large concrete platforms with tin roofs on wooden stilts are placed throughout the community as gathering places, these are where our meetings with community leadership took place. In each direction are gray concrete homes, lush green palm trees and mountains, and vibrant orange clay-like dirt.

The W&M students could, by many conventional measures, claim a high degree of success in their work in this rural community in Ghana. After their seven years working in the community, they boasted an impressive list of completed projects: a public latrine, a latrine at the primary school, and a maternity ward addition to the clinic were begun and completed. In addition to construction, a “Girls’ Club” was started as a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project by one student to help teach sexual education to girls in a culturally acceptable manner. This student purchased a collection of books on sexual education written specifically for school children in Ghana and she enlisted a teacher who planned to lead the program. A “Mothers’ Club” also met for mothers to support each other in teaching sexual health to their daughters. In 2014, a new primary school building was proposed because the older building was dilapidated and had a tin roof making teaching during rain difficult. After four years of work it was left uncompleted. Despite one unfinished project, the students’ commitment to the organization and fundraising efforts created tangible benefits for the community.

The sanitation projects in particular were proven to be consequential in achieving the mission of public health: to extend life and quality of life. There are two rivers in the community. The first is close to the residential area and was used by community members who did not have personal latrines to relieve themselves and collect water to wash dishes. Another river takes longer to walk to, and people use it to collect water for cooking and cleaning. SPIMA volunteers
built the public latrine to help keep the river that is closer to the community clean so that people would not need to spend so much of their day retrieving water from the river that is farther away from the community. A second latrine project near the primary school was also built by volunteers so that students did not have to walk to either the river or the community latrine to use the toilet when in class.

Volunteers recognized these real and immediate benefits for the community. Margo called the sanitation work “probably the most impactful because from year to year we did see that there were fewer incidences of water borne illnesses” (R07). Kim, who participated in SPAID a few years after Margo, realized the undeniable significance of the sanitation work first-hand from a community member:

One of my favorite things that we heard when we were there was when we heard about the cholera outbreak and so many surrounding communities and how it didn't touch [the community]. I thought that was just such a testament to the work that SPAID has put in, because without maybe the bathrooms without the clinic, like without all these things that SPAID did in the past it's very likely that cholera would have touched their village too. So that was really cool. Even though it wasn't me personally, who put those in, just, I feel like I was part of something that could have saved a lot of people's lives (R12).

Kim is referring to several conversations we had with community members and the Queen Mother, a leader in the community who told us that there was an outbreak of cholera in the area. When national health workers visited the community, they were surprised not to find a single case of cholera, and, according to the Queen Mother, they attributed this to the two public latrines.

Through these projects, the work SPIMA/SPAID and the partner NGO completed in the village appeared to improve public health and ameliorate pressing issues. Beyond the psychological satisfaction provided by helping someone else, student volunteers also gained social capital for their work in the form of recognition from their peers and university, added
lines to their CVs, and impressive stories for grad school applications and job interviews. Despite
the apparent mutual benefit, by 2018 students decided to suspend the organization’s work
indefinitely.

Attraction to Alternative Breaks

From the outset, students who are attracted to alternative breaks are a little more critical
than the average voluntourist. Branch Out has a list of values that we try to include in our
recruitment process and reiterate as much as possible in our attempts to move above and beyond
voluntourism. Almost every respondent, save two, whom I interviewed mentioned the allure of
tavel and unconventional summer plans as at least part of their reasoning for joining
SPIMA/SPAID. But, different from traditional voluntourism, they also told me of their desires to
learn more about development as an industry, enrich their cultural understanding, and a few
mentioned past experiences with volunteering they were hoping to avoid. For the most part,
SPIMA/SPAID volunteers hoped to learn a new way to be service-oriented that broke from the
classic mold of volunteering. Before joining SPAID, Emily said she never wanted to participate
in a voluntourism trip and chose SPAID because the recruitment process focused on tackling
issues, she had previously seen in community service:

The way that SPAID was pitched as a partnership where you're working with a rural
community and like actively doing service for like combating an issue that's experienced
in the community and doing that from the community’s self-determined needs, not just
coming in and saying ‘this is what we are going to do,’ that thought [sic] really holistic to
me. Um, and generally like a good way to contribute to solving a problem. (R01)

Emily refers to a main tenet of SPIMA/SPAID’s structure and mission: to focus on the needs that
the community identified rather than those a development organization chose for them. Kim was
also previously aware of critiques of voluntourism and felt that she was in good company to
avoid these:
I'm not going on vacation for three weeks and volunteering one of the weekends to make me feel better about my own privilege. It really was a, a genuine, like, I am here to learn, I'm here to help but not to, um, you know, boost my own resume or boost my own confidence. It was really like I felt everybody in our group was there for the right reasons. (R12)

Liz shared an experience working with what a religiously affiliated voluntourism trip previously and her desire to avoid this again with SPIMA/SPAID:

I had been involved in [an international service organization] and I went on the trip to Nicaragua and I just felt weird… going like to only work at like a Catholic school and teach English. I was just kind of thrown off by our reasoning for it. So, I chose the next time I was going to volunteer, I want to do something healthcare based and ethical. (R05)

Margo was interested in working for the State Department after graduation, but after taking a class that examined the international development field more critically, she decided to join SPIMA/SPAID so she could learn more given her interest in working internationally (R07).

The above quotes were the most salient, but eight out of the 16 interviewees expressed similar opinions about their choice to join SPIMA/SPAID. I also asked respondents about their reasoning for returning to the organization after the first year. Several people listed the strong and valuable relationships with other members of the organization or with community members in Ghana as their primary reason for returning. The second most common response was their aspiration to improve the program. Students entered SPIMA/SPAID with a burgeoning understanding of the development field and they were eager to learn more and teach others. Many also discussed their hopes to make the theoretical approach to the organization a more robust part of training and execution of the trip. “With more education and with more knowledge comes more analysis” Mia explained how she learned to become more critical after the first years of SPAID and she returned because she was “I was really excited about figuring out how to
change SPAID in the future to make it more sustainable” (R13). Emily saw lots of “gaps” and “mistakes,” and she felt she could “contribute as a site leader to doing our best to make those things right” (R01). The year before her, Sallie echoed the same:

> Coming into my second year, I thought…in a stupid, probably naive way that I would be able to kind of re-center the project, um, in a way that it would actually be able to have positive impact. Um, and that was a large part of my decision to return. (R04)

Along with the relationships I had built as a member of SPAID, my response would have been very similar to Sallie’s. Like Mia, Liz mentioned she was also excited about sustainability: “I knew how much research they were putting into it and…what can we do that's like a more sustainable project and like more culturally sensitive?” (R05). SPIMA/SPAID volunteers came into the organization with the expectation that they would be challenged to develop beyond what the traditional service experienced asked of them and after participating, many of them chose to return because they had only grown more critical.

**Struggling to Avoid the Anti-Politics Machine**

Although William & Mary students ultimately decided to stop their work in Ghana, the partnership began with great confidence in the ability of critically minded students with significant institutional support to create an equitable and sustainable partnership with communities in Ghana. The Student Partnership for International Medical Aid (SPIMA) was established as an alternative break under Branch Out and began operating out of the Office of Community Engagement at W&M in 2008. Break Away, the parent organization of Branch Out, has over 250 chapter schools that run both domestic and international trips led almost entirely by students. Break Away (2020) describes an alternative break in terms that seek to clearly differentiate it from the critiques of voluntourism:
A trip where a group of college students engage in direct service…Each trip has a focus on a particular social issue, and immersion in that issue begins long before the trip itself. Students educate themselves and each other, then do hands-on work with relevant organizations. These experiences challenge them to think critically and compassionately…Upon return, participants are empowered to make more informed decisions and to take meaningful action that supports a greater good. Through alternative breaks, we hope to foster the personal growth of contributing members of society.

Alternative breaks are focused on a particular social justice issue and require pre-trip education so that students are not only familiar with the topic before participating in direct service, but knowledgeable and critical of their own assumptions surrounding this topic. After participating in an alternative break, a student should be able to bring awareness to and educate others on a topic. The emphasis on education combats the harm caused by “ill-prepared and myopic” volunteers who, rather than learn to empathize with the communities they work with, confirm their own prejudices and continue to characterize broad swathes of people as needy or helpless (Slimbach 2010: 43; Raymond and Hall 2008). Alternative breaks promise to transform the student and represent this change by movement along an “active citizens’ continuum.” As an individual learns more about community engagement, they move from a member of a society, to a volunteer, to a conscientious citizen, and finally to an active citizen for whom “community becomes a priority in values and life choices” (Break Away 2020). Many students who are attracted to alternative breaks are already acquainted with critiques of voluntourism. They are seeking other opportunities to help people while also gaining hands-on learning experiences without the stigma attached to voluntourism. These students are not callow enough to believe that their participation in an alternative break will allow them to ‘change the world,’ rather they are enticed by the promise of personal development.

As a student-run organization, SPIMA embraced the alternative break model and turned a critical eye to its efforts. In 2008, members of SPIMA first visited Ghana through their work with a traveling health clinic run by a Christian reverend from the area. Clad in colorful scrubs,
student volunteers performed basic medical assistant tasks: taking blood pressure, temperature, height and weight. Ghana has a National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) that has the goal of providing equitable and affordable healthcare access to all Ghanaian citizens. Although not without some complications, it is largely effective, and the WHO has referred to it as a “shining example” of national health insurance on the African continent (Naatogmah 2019). Under the modernization assumption that outside volunteers from the Global North must intervene to provide communities in the Global South basic necessities, medical clinics have popped up throughout rural areas to provide quick remedies for a subsidized price. Students were concerned that medical work in rural communities in Ghana was counter-productive and unsustainable, especially with the NHIS in place. The students encountered anecdotal evidence that people in the communities they visited forwent regular doctor’s visits or delayed re-enrolling their insurance with the knowledge that a traveling clinic would return in a few months. One volunteer, Nichole, who participated from 2009 to 2011, received grant a from the Office of Community Engagement and worked with a William & Mary professor to develop a survey to assess the medical clinics (R09). Through this work she determined that the clinics were redundant (R09). Ghanaians had to pay a fee to go to the clinic, but, with the national insurance scheme, they would pay less or nothing to get the same services in a clinic staffed by professionals rather than volunteers. Other people weighed taking the time to visit a city to annually update their insurance or simply paying the small fee to visit the travelling clinic. Clinics like these undermine the public goods already provided by the government and maintain the neoliberal agenda of the government as a tool of liberalization and privatization, rather than assurer of public goods.
Students opted not to feed into the neoliberal anti-politics machine with clinics and began looking for a new project. Nichole started to think about “how SPIIMA could change and not just be this kind of medical band-aid trip” (R09). The band-aid analogy was a shared concern among other volunteers, Adam said he came to realize: “at the very best we were putting a band-aid over something that required something much greater…the medical trips really didn’t accomplish anything…a [partnership] makes a bigger difference than getting some Tylenol” (R14). Around the same time students were coming to this conclusion, a young Ghanaian volunteer with the same clinic decided to found his own NGO with the aim of addressing rural-urban disparities. The NGO was established in 2009 with the plan to partner with local and international communities to help empower local communities to develop from within, based on “self-determined” needs and “developmental” agendas. The summer of 2010, a SPIMA participant stayed in Ghana with the NGO and returned with a new direction for SPIIMA that would better reflect the critical approach that was the heart of their organizational legitimacy. As of 2012, SPIIMA’s stated mission was to “establish partnerships with local communities and NGOs in Ghana and carry out research which helps elucidate community needs and facilitate community-based development that is sustainable, ethical, and inclusive” (SPIIMA 2012: “Meeting 11”). William & Mary students returned to Ghana in 2011 with their partner NGO and a rural community in the Volta Region as the community partner.

SPIIMA members wanted their work to not only be helpful in the short term, but to have a lasting positive impact for the lives of people in their partner community. Although students may not have been well-versed in the history of SAPs that intensified the problems they were seeing, the students understood that a medical clinic run by untrained volunteers would not solve the underlying structural issues. With this critical view, students actively sought to familiarize
themselves with the most recent and prevailing literature on voluntourism and community development. In recognition of their own inexperience, early leaders of SPIMA enlisted the help of a faculty advisor, going against the recommendations of Break Away that encourages entirely student-led alternative breaks. As of 2011, volunteer training and project execution was overseen by a professor at William & Mary who served as the faculty advisor for the program. Through regular meetings and suggested readings, SPIMA students were able to gain a stronger theoretical background and context for a more critical community development.

The institutional conditions facing a student aid organization, however, immediately created tensions with SPIMA’s critical mission in ways that would recreate the anti-politics machine. Members of the Ghanaian NGO and William & Mary students decided to interview five different communities in order to choose one to partner with. These interviews were based on a ‘community needs assessment’ that the professor who advised the program provided (R09). The questions they asked reflected their mission to have communities identify their own needs: “What is going on in your day to day? What kind of challenges are you facing? What kind of challenges does your community as a whole face? How would you resolve those challenges? What would you prioritize?” (R09). However, the students’ position as the Western organization that would choose the most deserving community to receive their partnership and resources raised questions about the ability to establish horizontal relationships before the partnership even began. Rather than truly having communities identify their needs and priorities, surveying the communities operated as a way to determine which community had a development problem that students could feasibly solve. The primary concern of residents in the rural community ultimately chosen was the lack of a public latrine. Access to reliably clean drinking water and the promotion of sanitation and hygiene were significantly impacted by SAP implementation that
changed how these goods were distributed, strategically aiding some communities and neglecting others. As discussed, the rates to secure water access increased between 150% to 11,150% after SAPs were implemented (Anyinam, 1994: 455). Students looking to begin a short-term, local project in the community did not have a sufficient macro-lens necessary to understand that the need for a public latrine was shaped by structural adjustment. Simply building a latrine does not solve the root cause of the problem. Despite the students’ goal to avoid the narrow, technical approaches of modernization-inspired voluntourism programs (i.e. traveling medical clinics), a decidedly technical project was identified as feasible under the institutional conditions faced by a student aid organization that ignored the politics of the issue.

Both the act of choosing a deserving community and where we chose to stay in that community further threatened the establishment of a horizontal relationship. For intermediary organizations like our partner NGO, their goal is to aid in community development, but their survival is dependent on volunteers as customers. The choice of the community partner had a dual advantage in that community members expressed a need that students could feasibly address, and the community also had an attractive location with helpful resources for maintaining a volunteer-driven project. The village is near a few major tourist destinations that we visited on weekends. It is relatively close to the city where the head of the NGO lives, making it easy for him to visit during other parts of the year. It has one of the three clinics serving the eight villages in the region. And finally, there is a home owned and built by a man who established a line of hotels in Ghana. The home is his residence when he returns to the village and he allowed volunteers to use it for a small price included in our “site fee” to the NGO. While some homes in the village have running water or reliable electricity to power amenities like fans or television, none but this house have all the above. It also has a large indoor kitchen and enough rooms to
house all the volunteers and employees of the NGO, making it a convenient basecamp (although in earlier years volunteers camped in tents outside the house and used the indoor facilities and kitchen). Unfortunately, the positioning of the home, on the very edge of the village, and the barbed wire fence surrounding it, makes it a somewhat formidable enclosure that separated volunteers from the rest of the community. In our home country we enjoyed hidden, but easily imagined, privileges that the individuals with whom we worked did not have access to; by staying in this home, our position as foreign volunteers afforded us access to amenities they were excluded from even in their community. The separation of volunteers from community members and our ability to access conveniences they could not reinforced the perception of volunteers from the Global North as powerful and wealthy change makers. Even if students did not view themselves in the way modernization theory constructs volunteers, as generous donors imbued with some innate capability absent in the Global South, it is likely some stereotypes held by community members were confirmed rather than challenged by our presence. Many student volunteers did not identify this problem, but Sebastian explained the interaction in this way:

All these White college Americans show up and they have the ability to do something and once they come, you can get it done. And of course, that will ingrain in peoples’ minds subconsciously or consciously that you ‘have to wait for those White people to come and get this done.’ ‘We're not able to do it ourselves,’ that kind of thing. And I'm not discounting that. I think that is a serious problem, but I am, I'm not so certain that it was the seven or nine of us that did that. But I think that we may have contributed to that narrative (R10).

Sebastian hints to the structures built by the anti-politics machine before our arrival and before SPIMA’s creation. The structures we hoped to, but could not manage to, subvert. The tag line of our partner NGO is “Tour & Assist,” and in the chosen community we had the opportunity to comfortably do both. But the prioritization of volunteers’ needs and wants established from the outset of the partnership continued to the end of it and likely had a hand in its demise.
Indeed, from the start, the supposed “mutually beneficial partnership” took on a transactional approach more in line with neoliberalism. After identifying the community partner, a contract was drawn up and signed by both student volunteers and elders of the community. This established a top-down directive instead of a horizontal relationship. The contract was brokered by the partner NGO and explained that volunteers would be in the community for a specified period completing research and working on public health projects with the understanding that SPIMA and the NGO would provide materials and money and members of the community would provide manual labor. “If the SPIMA team could raise ‘x’ amount of money, then [the community] would organize the labor,” Nicole, told me, “they had various masons and carpenters in their community or broader community…that would come and help build.” (R09). This labor was promised to SPIMA by the elders, the most respected members of the community, who would not be expected to lend physical labor to the projects. Robinson et al. (2000) warn against using contracts to develop equitable relationships as contracts do not “convey the understanding, equality and intimacy associated with partnerships that must evolve over time.” A contract relationship is seen most often between market-led organizations in a neoliberal system, it expects a transactional rather than collaborative relationship. In contrast, a partnership, as Schaaf (2015: 71) explains, is a “cooperative relationship underpinned by a set of values (trust, transparency, accountability, reciprocity and respect) that evolves over time through mutual learning, voluntary participation and commitment, with a view to achieving mutually agreed goals”—all of which are difficult to achieve between organizations and individuals with historic power imbalances.

With the contract signed, the students began work on the public latrine project and plotted the future of the partnership by interviewing community members and planning projects
with a greater emphasis on sustainability. Describing the latrine project as a ‘technical’ solution is not to say it was not beneficial to the community, the anecdotal evidence presented above suggests the project provided significant aid. However, as a ‘technical’ solution it did not solve the underlying problems of access to public infrastructure exacerbated by structural adjustment programs. Students understood the superficial nature of this solution. Early volunteers viewed their primary work to be ethnographic research with the plan of interviewing every adult member of the community and developing a sustainable project based on the data from these interviews. This proposal is predicated on the volunteers’ understanding that “the capacity for collective action comes from shared understanding about the nature of the problem” (SPIMA 2011: “Meetings with [W&M Professor]”). In the meantime, they completed the aforementioned projects as a part of what they considered “unsustainable yearly offerings” as they felt the need to “reliably provide something every year that the community feels is beneficial” while interviewing the community (SPIMA 2012: “Meeting 7”). SPIMA students thought these short-term projects would build community trust as they worked to identify an ‘ultimate’ project to fulfill their mission statement of collaborating to fulfill a “self-determined need.” The students saw the legitimacy of their organization as lying in this quest to go beyond ‘band-aid’ solutions. In the early years, this generated great commitment from students who saw themselves as on the cusp of identifying the project that would serve that larger purpose.

Interviewing the community to seek out “self-determined” needs and focusing on capacity building both appear to be overt rejections of modernization theory methods of community development, but do not actually challenge them in practice. As they continued these efforts, SPIMA volunteers seemed to struggle with their understanding of how to combat a donor/recipient model. While they were concerned with establishing collective ownership of
their projects, the concept of “allowing” the community to “determine their own burdens and decide how to ameliorate them” was still an idea up for consideration and not a pre-condition of their work (SPIMA 2011: “Meetings with [W&M Professor]). In 2011, volunteers believed their role in the community was to “provoke and facilitate and nurture this own sense of what the top problems are…” Volunteers hoped to “more fully empower [the community] to act with agency” and not to be their “protectors” (SPIMA 2011: “Meetings with [W&M Professor]). Building the capacity of the village to ‘advocate for themselves’ was a goal prioritized at different times of SPIMA/SPAID’s history. Volunteers in 2013 reiterated their hope not to be seen as donors, “when we leave, we want the community to say, ‘look what we accomplished together,’ not ‘look what those Westerners did for us.’” Yet, the foundation of the partnership had already been laid, and SPIMA struggled with acknowledging and managing its neo-colonial identity throughout its entire history.

As the students continued to struggle to achieve their critical mission and maintain the legitimacy of their organization, in 2014, SPIMA changed its name to better reflect their intention to engage in mutually beneficial partnerships with communities rather than be providers of medical aid.

SPAID, the Student Partnership for International Aid and Development, kept the original mission statement of SPIMA but students introduced the new organization with a set of “precepts and shared beliefs” that included the importance of sustainable work:

- Uninformed good intentions can cause more harm than good
- Sustainability is the pillar of lasting impact
- Positive impact is not always tangible
- Research informs sustainable service
- Our actions will be characterized by forethought. Our group will not enter a country without clearly defined goals and individuals trained to meet those goals
Upon leaving the community, citizens should feel we have accomplished something together, not believe we have provided something as a gift (SPAID 2014: “Precepts and Shared Beliefs”)

Here students clearly articulated the idea of mutually beneficial partnerships as a response and alternative to voluntourism. Research, forethought, and training are the results of pre-trip education in the alternative break model and prevent deploying a well-intentioned, but ill prepared volunteer. The last precept shows that volunteers embraced the idea that MBPs could help them navigate around the problematic donor/recipient narrative constructed by modernization theory. Yet, it also demonstrates lurking modernization assumptions, specifically a concern that providing “something as a gift” would cultivate “dependency.”

The Institutional Context of Student-Led Alternative Aid Organizations

Ultimately, despite SPAID’s efforts to overcome the anti-politics machine, the institutional conditions under which student-led organizations operate made it difficult, if not impossible, to do so. Students began to question if they were fulfilling their mission and tried to justify their own legitimacy. As volunteers challenged the organization’s legitimacy, this further hindered the ability for the organization to operate. SPIMA/SPAID depends on students to volunteer their time, energy, and money. When legitimacy is challenged, Suchman (1995: 594), asserts that members of an organization will advocate for future changes and restructuring. Over the years, SPIMA volunteers read the critiques of voluntourism and responded to them by amending their training and restructuring parts of the organization. Still, membership began to dwindle, and volunteers were less committed to the organization.

Aid organizations must sustain their ability to function by having constant demand from volunteers. In this case, student volunteers had to be committed enough to the organization to spend significant time and energy on fundraising. Our partner NGO is a third party that connects volunteers from the Global North with communities in Ghana and provides translation and
technical support. When SPIMA/SPAID visited the village in the summers, the NGO provided a team of three translators, a young woman to clean and occasionally translate, and a contracted driver. The head of the NGO would also stay for most of the three weeks of the students’ visit and his wife who also cooked six meals a day, three for student volunteers and three for the Ghanaian team. The NGO was tasked with paying the seven members of their team during our three-week visit, purchase our food, water, and transportation and still have funds left over to run their organization when students were not visiting. Each volunteer paid a site fee of approximately $700 directly to the NGO but we were also responsible for fundraising for our flight costs (~$1000) and project fees (~$3000-$9000 collectively) (SPAID 2018: “SPAID Budget 4/20”). In 2018, the cost for the entire trip including site fees, project fees, flights, excursions, and mandatory insurance was $18,788 or ~$2,300 per volunteer (SPAID 2018: “SPAID Budget 4/20”). To raise these funds, between visits, we were writing grants, applying for scholarships, organizing fundraising events, managing GoFundMe pages, etc.¹ Emily described the immense stress of trying to fundraise, “it was something crazy…it was a huge, huge barrier for our team” and her concern that our parent organization, Branch Out did not have the “resources to support that kind of student organization” (R01).

The cost, paired with their concerns about the legitimacy of SPAID’s work, also made volunteers wonder if it is better to simply donate to the community rather than spend the additional money and time to sustain a group of students for three weeks a year, “what is beneficial about being here [Ghana] versus raising money and spending it to fund the project?”

¹ Beyond being a threat to the ‘sustainability’ of these programs, the price, time required to fundraise, and the lack of compensation, lends this work to volunteers with greater means and excludes those who cannot afford to volunteer. Alternative break programs are social justice centric, but inequalities in access do not only exist between countries, “international exchanges can reproduce inequalities on educational and cultural planes” (Vickers and Dominelli 2015: 1911). “Enabling all students to participate in international exchanges is essential to counteract further privileging of already advantaged young people who can widen their networks through exchanges” (Vickers and Dominelli 2015: 1911).
Liz asked me this rhetorical question she frequently asked herself (R05). Meredith shared this frustration and was clearly angry when she told me:

I'd rather just would have donated money. I was like, ‘why did I spend all this money for plane tickets, for vaccinations, for malaria pills to be here for only three weeks,’ which is not a long span of time, to not see our goal accomplished? (R15)

And Adam who worked with SPIMA on and off from 2008 to 2011 brought up the issue of efficacy:

The money required to run one of those clinics the way we were doing it with SPIMA could be spent in far, far better ways with far more effective outcomes. We spent thousands and thousands of dollars flying us all over from the United States to Ghana to run those clinics…You could have paid a few hundred dollars, hired people in the local community and put that money into the local economy and run the same clinics and the amount of money we spent on stuff like plane tickets and things like that you could have used that to run the clinics for a month instead of eight days. (R14)

The high price and the question of whether donating would be more prudent caused all the of these volunteers to challenge the legitimacy of the organization.

The high volunteer turnover that was inherent in a student-led organization like SPIMA also posed difficulties for maintaining its legitimacy. Each year, a new group of students had to be on-boarded and trained. Some volunteers worried that this caused massive inefficiencies, extending the timeline of projects and even preventing the completion of our last undertaking.

Sibley (2010: 198) argues that high membership turnover is a major reason for loss of progress with each subsequent generation of students and found that “in order for a project to be sustainable, each group member must be involved in that project for a minimum of two years.” Margo tried to describe this process from the point of view of the NGO, “there’re new leaders every year and [the head of the NGO] has to build that rapport again, and explain everything to them, and that takes a lot of time and energy” (R07). Kim, agrees:
I think the only thing is that these projects that we're trying to do are huge and they really are kind of full-time jobs and of course we're students and we can only travel for three weeks each summer. So, I think that is the only drawback that it's a lot to get to a brand new country, a new continent that you've never been to and have to kind of go through this like welcome orientation, which obviously we really benefited from. But I'm sure from their perspective that is precious time that we could use building, or that we can be doing research, like do the work we came to do. (R12)

Sallie refers to the same issue from the NGO’s perspective, “I cannot imagine that it was a fun position to be beholden to the capacities and whims and attitudes of young college students who live in a very different socioeconomic context” (R04). To reduce the amount of turnover, SPIMA restructured their organization in 2012 by implementing subgroups. Rather than one large group completing all the tasks of the organization, from 2012 to 2015 there were five subgroups for each function of SPIMA: Ethnography, Language/Culture, Financial, Outreach, and GIS. The subgroups were created with the understanding that distributing some leadership responsibilities to each member of the team would encourage collective ownership and with more buy in, fewer students would leave the program each year.

In a 2013 “redirection” meeting it was suggested that students must commit in their freshman year to participate in the trip all four years which was later amended to two, but I have no evidence that the rule was ever enforced (SPIMA 2013: “SPIMA Redirection Meeting”). These efforts to reduce turnover and its effects, however, could not overcome the institutional conditions of a student-led organization, and students continued to be frustrated with how this conflicted with the values of their organization. Margo, who participated in 2014 and 2015, addressed this policy and sustainability concern:

Every four years you have a new batch of students that attends the university... I think the students are always going to get more than communities do. Unless students start off with this project and then stick with it [until] graduation, they're always going to gain more. (R07)
The last year with subgroups was 2015 and dwindling membership was likely a major reason this structure collapsed. When I co-led in 2018, we tried to delegate work in this same fashion, but realized that we had too few people.

Indeed, as students continued to question the moral legitimacy of SPIMA over time, fewer students agreed to participate. In 2018 there were eight students including two site leaders, in 2017 there were nine, in 2016 ten. In 2013, 15 students participated in SPIMA. Although I do not know the exact number before 2013, I do know it was more than 15; in a correspondence between the team and the head of the NGO who stated that “[The village] is fine and everybody is doing great but just that they think they have offended the team of 2012 hence few group of people 2013” (SPIMA 2013: “Meeting 12”). Kim believes SPIMA/SPAID ended largely because students were not returning. To the question: “After the year that you participated, the program has been on pause. Can you talk a little bit about, from your understanding, why that happened?” she responded:

I think the biggest reason is that the year that I traveled, it was a pretty small group, but it was a small group of individuals who are very involved in other things. And so towards the end of the trip it became pretty clear that, um, there were not going to be people from that particular group who are able to, to travel the following year and able to put in the work that would have been necessary to travel. So, I think for that reason, that's kind of why they had to stop…just a lack of availability. (R12)

Emily also attributed dwindling membership to the end of the program but linked this to the organization’s declining legitimacy: “there wasn't enough students who cared enough to keep organizing to make it happen, with…you know, the time and energy that we actually devoted to it” (R01). Without enough students who “cared enough,” it became less feasible to continue. With fewer students, both the organization’s memory and moral legitimacy suffered. Knowledge management refers to the sharing and maintenance of knowledge within an organization and is measured by how well information is passed down with each iteration and between old members.
to new members (Girard and Girard 2015). But, as Molly noted, “the whole thing with student
groups is that you just rotate in and rotate out and you don’t care much about what happens
after” (R06). Compared to other student groups, SPIMA/SPAID was actually excellent at
upholding knowledge management; one respondent who had access to files for other Branch Out
breaks was very impressed with SPIMA/SPAID’s method:

There was no structure to it [knowledge management in other Branch Out trips]. It was
very much dependent on how motivated the site leaders were to upload things to the
Google Drive. And there had been a lot of, I think, confusion years before about like
expectations around community or around communication and knowledge transfer. Um, and I think honestly…people were just so overwhelmed and busy with tasks that they
forgot to write stuff down…[With SPAID] I was just amazed at the plethora of
information and how [well it was] documented from year to year. It was really helpful in
giving me context and um, hopefully we set up more structure for that to continue it to
happen in future years.

Despite this, the very nature of working with student volunteers is the high turnover rate
as students graduate, and when they do, they have very little incentive to return and help with
knowledge management. Sallie found herself fall “victim” to this, “once you’re out of it, you’re
out of it. I think that is a big reason why the sustainability of the group just didn’t turn over
anymore” (R04). Emily felt SPAID had no plan in place to prevent making the same “mistakes
that we made in the past so that we didn’t have to make them in the future” (R01). Emily hints at
the same worry volunteers had in the last year of the partnership. During SPAID’s 2018 trip we
interviewed two new communities, one of which we planned to return to in 2019 to begin a new
partnership. Volunteers were reluctant to move to a new community without assessing the
program and creating a plan to avoid returning to old mistakes. Nichole who participated early in
SPIMA/SPAID’s history was describing other voluntourism trips when she said, “international
student trips were allowed to keep doing the same thing when some of those things were
problematic,” but this neatly illustrates the fears of students in 2018 (R09). This anxiety fed into
concerns of moral illegitimacy; how could we, in good conscience, start a new project with methods we knew were not ideal?

As a leader for SPAID, I tried to include more theoretically driven education and address critiques I had not heard as a participant in SPAID. I joined the SPAID team in 2016 and visited Ghana for the first time in 2017 and again as a co-leader for the trip in 2018. The training I received covered basic language skills in Ewe and familiarized us with the country and culture. We learned about ethical storytelling, or how to talk about our trip in Ghana without perpetuating American stereotypes and preconceived notions about the entire continent of Africa. We were taught about alternative breaks from Branch Out’s perspective and the mission and vision of our partner organizations. In our fourth meeting we were introduced to issues of privilege, oppression, and the concepts of social identity and cultural humility, presumably with the intention that we would continue to learn about and discuss these concepts in later conversations. Without a faculty advisor, we were not given the same background knowledge which allowed earlier groups to have discussions that were driven by the theory and discourse around development. We also lost the historical knowledge of our own organization. Our two site leaders had participated the year prior, and the rest of our team were travelling for the first time. For the next year, another student and I applied to lead the trip, naively believing we were better prepared to address our positionality as volunteers from the Global North and ‘begin’ more rigorous research methods. Both of us were first year students and this seemed to be a bonus because we could both grow with SPAID and it projects for the next three years. We created a curriculum using training materials from the first year we were involved, and we facilitated more frequent meetings to teach and review topics and theories with our participants. This curriculum was steeped in our nascent understanding of the colonial history of Ghana and its connections
with the United States, global racism, colorism, capitalism, and neo-colonialism. These were theoretical paradigms we felt were sorely missing in our own trainings, but these discussions were limited by our still burgeoning ability to articulate such broad, dynamic, and sensitive topics. We actively recruited a new faculty advisor as SPAID had not had one since 2015, but in the meantime, we did the best we could do. My co-site leader was also a member of another on campus international volunteer program and she borrowed readings from her training. She suggested a re-structuring of SPAID based on their framework of sub-groups which we were entirely unaware was already attempted. We began research into how to implement GIS into our survey of the community without realizing this had been done in 2012. I believed myself to be novel for asking our participants questions with almost the exact same wording I found that site leaders had asked their participants three and four years prior:

- How do we explain our benefit from doing this?
  - What is our motivation for doing this?
  - Is it important that we make it explicit to the community?
  - How important is it that we express uniform benefit?
  - Does it have to be tangible?
  - Does it have to be uniform amongst team members? (SPIMA 2013: “Meeting 11”)
- Is it possible a need-based approach could hurt communities? (SPIMA 2012: “Relevant Media/Reading Material”)
- How do we intervene without compromising agency? (SPIMA 2012: “Meetings w/ [W&M Professor]”)

It is as if early SPIMA volunteers built a set for a play we performed annually and rather than maintain the set by adding embellishments or removing unnecessary pieces, every few years we tore it down and used the parts to build an entirely new set that was no better or worse than the first. In other words, we did not build on our work and lost valuable progress each year which unfortunately is not uncommon for student organizations like ours (Sibley 2010).

Many students blamed Branch Out for volunteers’ lack of preparation and neglecting knowledge management. Branch Out was generous with its financial backing of SPIMA/SPAID,
but students did not receive the guidance they found necessary. Break Away encourages all programs to be entirely student-run, but without an advisor many students felt they were lacking the necessary qualifications to lead an international service trip. During an emotional moment in our interview Sallie quietly admitted “I just felt so unprepared” (R04). Later Sallie told me,

> The hardest part is just, you're asking college students to be responsible for the wellbeing of the community, with very, very little technical background that is not academically codified. And I think that that is really, especially without an advisor to guide you, that is just such a one kind of plainly irresponsible thing to do. (R04)

While clearly, we were in no way responsible for the wellbeing of the village, I understand where this can be a volunteer’s impression, especially as a leader of the program. Izzie also felt a lack of guidance, especially toward the end of SPAID’s career,

> The fact that the support was mainly coming from a 22 year old advisor who had just graduated college and didn't have the expertise or even potentially history or context around international development at all or research or any of those things… SPAID was a lot more complex than what Branch Out had the capacity to, to handle in my opinion. (R16)

Emily agreed that “the program, Branch Out itself just didn't have the resources to support that kind of student organization” (R01). Knowledge management helps organizations save time by cutting out redundancy but understanding the history of the organization also helps members grow and avoid past mistakes. By improving on work in prior years, organizations may be able to maintain legitimacy as they evolve. In contrast, my experience leading SPAID was that of the proverbial reinventor of the wheel and I only became aware of my folly once I researched for this thesis. The lack of knowledge management and the ability to evolve, further damaged our ability to fulfill the goal of differentiating from modernization-driven “development.”

**From the Quest for a Real Solution to Demise**

Over the first four years of the organization’s work, W&M students completed a number of technical projects as they continued to chase after the ghost of a ‘sustainable’ project with
long-term impacts. The first few projects—the latrines and refurbishing the maternity ward—were relatively feasible for the student-led organization. Student volunteers visiting annually with intermittent help from community members throughout the year were enough to complete these projects. However, the next project identified was a six-classroom school building that would take more time, resources, people, and experience to finish. This project stretched the fundraising capacity of the students in new ways and made the students more dependent on the community’s expertise in carpentry and other skills. The last year of SPAID, students returned to see that no work had been done on the school in the intervening year. Ultimately this project was left incomplete by students.

Lack of collective ownership is a major critique of voluntourism that alternative breaks attempt to curtail in their model, but as discussed, the precedent of collective ownership was not set and this was only illuminated when the project required more skill, time and expertise than student volunteers could manage. Community members with jobs, children, leadership roles, and church services all have different responsibilities pulling them in different directions and away from the project. While volunteers may view building the school as the most crucial event in the community, community members may not see it as a priority in their daily lives. The lack of momentum around building a new school cannot be accounted for by community apathy, but a failure in the design of the project and the realities of demanding lives in the wake of SAPs. In conversations with adults in the village it is clear they value a quality education for their children and viewed the new building as important. The school building took longer than anticipated because the adults in the community who we relied on for the majority of the labor had different demands on their time and interests and because the precedent of the collective ownership was not established in previous projects. From the community’s perspective, it was our work to
complete. We were seen, and inadvertently acted, as the more powerful, wealthier, actors of change who were gifting our time and labor to the community, the exact donor/recipient model of the modernization school.

Yet, beyond the issue of collective ownership, there were other concerns parents brought up that would not be addressed with the building of a new school. For example: teaching is a government position, teachers from large cities often prefer to stay in cities rather than being placed in rural areas which leads to a high turnover rate. The high turnover means that many children do not receive consistent education and spend time re-learning or reviewing what their last teacher taught them. Some parents cannot afford the required school uniform for their children which means they cannot attend school until enough funds are saved. Some parents do not have the time or money to take a Tro Tro (rural taxi) to the market to buy books, pencils, and paper for school. Some parents do not have electricity at home which makes it difficult for their child to study after the sun goes down. Students are taught about how to use computers on a chalk board and cannot practice with an actual computer unless they visit the internet café in the market, putting them at a disadvantage when competing with students from the city with reliable access to computers and internet. Dirt roads in rural areas are difficult to traverse when it rains, meaning trips to the market for school supplies and internet cafés are more infrequent during the rainy season. Parents who make their income outside of the community may be on tighter budgets during the rainy season.

All the above examples require an approach that addresses structural inequality between urban and rural areas in Ghana rather than technical issues at the local level. While a new school building would allow students to be taught with fewer interruptions during the rainy season, it does not mean that there would be more equitable access to education for the children in the
community. Over the years SPIMA/SPAID moved from providing ‘band-aid’ medical solutions to larger ‘band-aids’ in the form of infrastructure that still could not solve broader inequalities.

Although the lack of progress on the school appears to be largely the result of SPAID’s own missteps and broader structural dynamics, student volunteers came to develop modernization anxieties. The more time we spent in the community, the more worried volunteers were about producing dependency. In our experiences we saw the evidence that international volunteerism provides immediate and valuable aid, but we were also of the belief that any achievement of international volunteering “is cast into doubt when the potential harm of exacerbating inequality and dependency are considered” (McLennan, 2014: 172).

The last summer that SPAID students visited Ghana was a particularly difficult trip. Before researching the history of the organization, my perspective for understanding our demise was limited to my two years of experience. Comparing 2017 to 2018 there were several logistical issues that made for an extraordinarily frustrating experience for new participants and after the trip was complete no students wished for a repeat. I viewed the 2018 trip as an anomalous failure rather than a collapse several years in the making.

First, volunteers paid and fundraised more money per person than any other previous group. In 2018, we travelled with fewer students, Ghana was experiencing inflation, and a national shortage of the required Yellow Fever vaccine meant volunteers paid anywhere from $50-$700 for the vaccine depending on their insurance.

Second, the increase in cost was exacerbated by the fact that we also had fewer members than previous years. In 2018, the cost for the entire trip before vaccines or visas was approximately $2,300 per volunteer (SPAID 2018: “SPAID Budget 4/20”). In 2013, the total cost was $20,372, but this burden was shared by 15 participants, making the price per volunteer
almost $1000 less (SPIMA 2013: “Budget”). We had only eight members, none of whom were fully prepared or equipped to take up the mantle of our work with the zeal and passion it had previously been afforded. Of those eight, myself and my co-site leader both planned to study abroad the next year and therefore could not lead again, one student was graduating, two were entirely disaffected. That left only three people who could potentially lead the program. One decided not to travel again but wished to help new participants. The remaining two eventually decided they would rather avoid the stress of leading.

Third, in 2018 our goal was to complete the new school building project in one final push and identify a new community to work with. We were unable to achieve either of these goals in the three weeks we were in the community for a few reasons. Before arriving, we thought community members had laid cement and completed the roof so that all the work left to do was the final touches of windows, doors, and paint. When we found this work incomplete, we blamed the community for becoming too “dependent” on us. An administrative issue out of our control made it so the money we raised and sent to the NGO was delayed by 30 days, arriving a week after we left Ghana. We were not able to do the work we came to do and respondents who participated the last year felt “useless” and stagnant. Although we did surveys in two communities, choosing a new community before we had satisfactorily closed our partnership with the first community felt wrong, especially without first forming a plan to avoid making the same mistakes.

Finally, as a result of these stressful situations and the unexpected amount of downtime, we were freer to discuss and question our role in the community. Our conversations during the off time were long and bitter as we challenged the moral legitimacy of our organization. I believed our critical conversations to be the result of more theoretically driven training, but after
reviewing the training material of previous years, I can no longer argue that. These conversations were exhausting, one respondent described them as the “bane” of her college experience. At the end of each, we were still faced with the question of who is willing and interested in continuing to improve SPAID and we came up short.

In alternative breaks, borrowing Ferguson’s (1990:20) words, “intentional plans interacted with unacknowledged structures and chance events to produce unintended outcomes which turn out to be intelligible not only as the unforeseen effects of an intended intervention, but also as the unlikely instruments of an unplot ted strategy.” Students’ failure, especially in that last year, that led to the end the program was a result of chance events (delayed arrival of supplies) and unacknowledged structures (broader structural inequalities that students cannot address that stymie mutual beneficial partnerships), which then foiled the students’ “intentional [and well-meaning] plans.” But the development organizations that Ferguson examined continue their work for years without providing any real benefit to communities and using the anti-politics machine to mask this phenomenon. But student volunteers peeked beneath the façade and they did not like what they saw. Dejectedly, Kim and Liz both admitted what other volunteers hinted at or told me they had fears of: “we didn’t change anything in a real, material, significant way,” “we never served the communities we said we were serving” (R12; R05). But rather than continue and claim success in terms created by development discourse as Ferguson found was the norm, student volunteers chose to cancel the program.

Throughout SPIMA/SPAID’s history it has strived and struggled for legitimacy. SPIMA/SPAID’s superordinate institutions (William & Mary, the Office of Community Engagement, Branch Out, etc.) readily granted the organization legitimacy as it was these institutions that fallowed the ground to grow groups like SPIMA/SPAID. Funders of our
organization found it legitimate enough to invest thousands of dollars into it each year. Although I cannot speak to how legitimate the community members and elders viewed us, they treated volunteers with respect and frequently demonstrated their appreciation for our presence through actions and words. But SPIMA/SPAID found it difficult to justify their existence to peers and to themselves.

As a participant and as a site leader for SPIMA/SPAID I had been told that we were not a voluntourism trip because our approach was different and preferred. I repeated the same to my participants and did so with conviction. But we were volunteers and we were tourists. While volunteers could point to several examples of legitimate work that improved lives even if only for a short time, participants in the last year could not reconcile years of failing to make structural change and their concerns about producing dependency mounted with each trip. But given the ideal of MBP, which is functionally impossible within the structure of the alternative break model, volunteers could not overlook the perceived failure of dependency. While these issues are unavoidable with an organization based in modernization theory, we believed we were different and better than a traditional voluntourism trip and therefore could not identify nor address the source of our impotence.

Suchman (1995: 590, 594, & 597) gives several examples of what organizations may do when confronted with the potential loss of legitimacy and most center around advocating for future change and restructuring. Over the years SPIMA/SPAID underwent different structural overhauls, re-adjustments, re-naming and re-identifying future goals in a scrabble for continued legitimacy. Even in the last year, we discussed choosing a project for the future that would be so technically facile it could be completed in four years or less in the hope that a shorter project and partnership would avoid the perceived issue of dependency. After so many years of restructuring
and wrestling to justify our moral legitimacy, in 2018 when volunteers frankly asked each other, “why should our organization exist?”, collectively we could not produce a satisfactory answer.

Despite our efforts to do the opposite, through our work we reproduced and fully accepted aspects of the modernization paradigm: positioning ourselves as experts, ignoring history, structure and politics while implementing technical solutions, and blaming the community for “depending” on our aid. But just as early SPIMA volunteers realized that by participating in travelling medical clinics, they were becoming tools of the anti-politics machine (although they could not label it), similarly, volunteers in 2018 understood the anti-politics machine enough to decide they wanted nothing to do with it.

**Moral Illegitimacy on Two Counts**

Alternative breaks taught volunteers a “new” paradigm for participating in international development. It was built on the critiques of voluntourism, but the institutional conditions under which it operated made it impossible to break out of the structure of development built by the modernization and neoliberal paradigms. In a roundabout effort to avoid modernization, alternative break discourse used modernization assumptions to guide the work and the analysis of the work. Alternative breaks espoused the importance of building equitable relationships through mutually beneficial partnerships but did so in a structure incompatible with equity. When confronted with this failure, the alternative break training steered volunteers to blame the cultivation of dependency without realizing the latent modernization assumptions that created the dependency critique. While many volunteers were able to clearly identify the lack of separation between SPIMA/SPAID and development initiatives of the past, they still favored modernization in some of their beliefs. Ultimately SPIMA/SPAID volunteers
could no longer justify the organization’s moral legitimacy based on their understanding of its goals.

**Volunteer Acceptance of Modernization & The Anti-Politics Machine**

SPIMA/SPAID volunteers at once understood some of the deeper critiques of the new development discourse but also embraced its problematic modernization assumptions of dependency. These students found fault with the moral legitimacy of both SPAID and the community as an “abject recipient.” These modernization assumptions about the problems of dependency led them to embrace their time in Ghana as a useful learning experience.

**Dependency Anxiety.** Through SPIMA/SPAID, volunteers were warned to avoid the cultivation of dependency and those who viewed the dependency critique as valid worried that their work was doing more harm than benefit to communities.

I asked Mia a question I only asked those who participated in the last year, why did we not return? She replied:

> I think my understanding of what happened was, is we really kind of got into analyzing if this partnership was the best, because I think we all had really high hopes and we were really trying to make it be the most sustainable project. But it's disheartening if you go and you see that like, ‘Oh, they're just waiting until we get here to start it up again.’ (R13, emphasis added)

Mia brings up the term sustainability in her discussion of dependency. In pre-trip education, Mia heard that sustainability was a primary goal of SPAID and that dependency challenges both sustainability and capacity of the organization, leaving them worse off than they were before intervention. If I had been asked a year ago why SPAID chose not to return to the village, my response would likely have been similar. While there was a combination of logistical issues that
made a trip seemingly untenable, most of all, I had ethical concerns around reproducing dependency, much like Emily:

It became that the way SPAID was organized, that it would be more of a hindrance on the community and that we would continue perpetuating problematic systems and making the same mistakes we've had in the past that we didn't feel like it was an ethical decision to continue doing that. Um, so we decided to draw it in and discontinue all of our international partnerships for the program and focus on things that we were confident that we could sustainably and ethically do and focus on our domestic partnerships [referring to Branch Out’s domestic trips]. (R01)

Dependency was a primary anxiety of volunteers in the years leading to SPAID’s last trip. I asked what the village gained from the partnership, but I also asked if the respondents thought community members experienced any drawbacks. I received a wide range of responses, but respondents who participated in the last two years of SPAID almost uniformly described dependence as a drawback.

I did notice that they kind of sort of always expected, for SPAID to be there and relied on them to be there to again jump start something else. Because I definitely remember in some of the interviews they would be like, ‘I'm glad you guys are back’ or ‘we need SPAID to help us start this’ or something like that. (Julia: R08)

Rather than considering other reasons for why the projects required a ‘jump start’ from SPAID, Julia perceives the community as being ‘reliant’ on our aid because we did not observe any more progress on the projects we began from year to year other than the progress we made during our three week visits. Kim had the same concern:

I really am not even sure we should have been in that village because I think it almost goes exactly against what SPAID tries to do: making them not be able to work on their own. Because I think the biggest way that I saw that clearly was that when we got there, they really had hardly worked on the school you said since you were there the summer before. And that, to me, is a reflection of, okay, we really haven't necessarily passed on the skills that they needed to continue it or the confidence because they just think that we're going to keep coming back and doing it. So, I think it's definitely a mixture of their fault and, and SPAID's fault for that. But it's definitely hard when you're so well intentioned to see that these people who still need and want your help so badly aren't going to be able to receive it in the future. (R12, emphases added)
Kim worried that being in the village was causing more harm than benefit. She argued that we were not helping ‘build capacity,’ instead we were detrimental to their ability to do their own work. Kim refers to the skills and confidence needed to complete the school building, but she does not discuss how it is the community members—whose numbers include carpenters and masons—who have the expertise and training to construct an edifice. As students we had none of the necessary hard skills to carry out the project we started. We were reliant on knowledge within the community to finish this project, but from the outset of SPIMA/SPAID, collective ownership was not an established expectation or precept. Kim is of the belief that the community shares culpability with SPAID because of their failure to ‘buy into’ the projects of a development organization. This description is very reminiscent of the modernization theory perspective: 1) viewing actors from the Global North as development experts and subjects from the Global South as lacking capability; 2) given the project’s inevitable failure in the development structure, blame is shifted to the people who did not sufficiently participate in “modernizing.” Finally, Kim indicates that she regrets leaving the community dependent on outside help. Later in her interview I asked Kim if there were any personal drawbacks to her participation, she replied that it was difficult for her to reconcile her role in what she considered to be a dependency-producing project:

I actually kind of struggled coming back to the U.S. following my experience in Ghana. Um, feeling a little bit like what have we done? I think our trip was very well intentioned. Obviously the whole point of SPAID is to be sustainable, but I felt a little bit discouraged...feeling guilty, um, after finding out that that we wouldn't be returning to the same community because the feeling that I got as we were leaving was very much that the people in [the village] were like really, really dependent on the three weeks that SPAID spends there each year. So, it's just hard to leave them knowing that maybe they didn't fully understand that we wouldn't be coming back or just not knowing for sure that that school will ever be completed. Um, I would say struggled with that a little bit. (R12)
Kim was not alone in the believing that our work caused as much disservice as it did service. Both Emily and Mia also worried that our project was detrimental to ‘agency’ and ‘capacity.’

[The community] depending on us for funding of the school building was difficult…There’s a further power imbalance in that way because they didn’t have the agency to fund their own buildings…but ultimately students taking capacity away from the work site definitely got in the way of community development. (Emily, R01, emphases added)

I think they became too dependent, definitely. And especially because we had been there for so long, I feel like if we had been there for four years or max five years, they could have like conceived of a world without us there. But like seven years is a long time to be in the same community. Um, and I think it was great that we got so close to them, they were so comfortable with us. But I think for them in the long term they're going to have to figure out how to have their own agency and organize themselves to get things done rather than just having somebody come from above, um, with money that’s like, ‘Oh, this is how you can do it’ (Mia, R13, emphasis added).

This is not a critique of voluntourism, it is a critique of people in the Global South who are perceived as abject recipients. The idea that an autonomous, self-sustaining community with history much older than the eight years of the SPIMA/SPAID partnership could not “conceive of a world without us there” is condescending and paternalistic.

Dependency anxiety is the perfect illustration of alternative break’s failure to disrupt the mold of modernization theory. SPIMA/SPAID volunteers wished for sustainable, long-term, real positive impacts for the community. Dependency, the product of anti-politics in its maneuver to mask or ignore the reverse flow of goods and services, became volunteer’s primary critique of their own work. Rather than departing from modernization, we doubled back, revealing our biases against the Global South. Unaddressed, volunteers could not possibly create an equitable partnership. It is an ouroboros perpetually eating its own tail, cyclical and unintentionally self-sabotaging.

**Student Learning vs. Community Benefit.** Alternative breaks claim to transcend the problem with voluntourism as an industry that inherently caters to volunteer needs and interests. In practice, students found alternative breaks’ claim to moral high ground to be disingenuous.
Margo summed this up, “I think the purpose really was more of the student leadership and development than it was the actual community development work that we did” (R07). Nichole confirmed Margo’s suspicion, “it was more, um, a student experience abroad but being painted as community development work” (R09).

Indeed, some of their fellow students ultimately focused on the personal benefits they experienced to justify their participation despite what they saw as the organization’s—and community’s—failure. Many volunteers found that by working with SPIMA/SPAID they had experiences that contributed to their understanding of social action and their positionality in a much more comprehensive way than simply reading about it.

Sallie (R04) argues that working in Ghana brought her to a level of understanding that would not have been possible without SPAID, “I had a come to moment of what my role as a White woman in international development is or isn’t…in a way no other experience had led me to think about…I have these beliefs now, but I wouldn't have had them if I hadn't done SPAID.” Julia (R08) reiterated this conclusion, “my mind wouldn't really be open to these sorts of ideas had I not gone and seen sort of the pitfalls of the system and the shortcomings of the system.” Joanna (R11) felt that she gained “awareness as to [her] position as a person of privilege going into the community.” Discussions of relative privilege and recognizing systemic failure are more unique to alternative break volunteer programs than they may be to a development organization.

Volunteering with SPIMA/SPAID allowed some students to be more discerning when it came to future involvements. Liz (R05) told me that when she went to medical school, she encountered several international student volunteering groups at an activities fair and because of her experience in SPIMA, she asked each of the recruiting organizations how they try to assure their work is sustainable. McGehee and Santos (2005: 773) observed the same among
participants of some voluntourism organizations, they found that volunteers became “more particular about those with whom they chose to be involved” and asked “more questions about who the organizations are helping, how they are assisting, how resources are distributed, and how organizations demonstrate their effectiveness.” Sebastian explained how SPAID gave him a greater understanding of development as a field, both the technical difficulties and politics that no other experience had given him before:

I definitely gained an appreciation of, I guess like the complexity and fraught aspects of development. Um, I wasn't exactly naive that there were problems beforehand, but I think that I did, and I frankly still kind of do, have an opinion that generally speaking, infusing interest, time, and money into a region is overall typically good for it. But I think I realized more through that training that there were certainly areas in which it can be painful or, um, regressive for those regions. I think I also realized how few people in the world recognize those issues because those weren't things that I ever really heard about. And I've done plenty of related trips in the past. (R10)

Like Sebastian, Mia learned the reality of how aid affects community partners rather than merely the rhetoric she had heard before about development projects:

Before SPAID, I didn't have a good idea of what like the cons of international aid was. I thought, you know, that classic, ‘Oh you just go over there, and you know, you saved the children and that's fine.’ Um, but with like actually interacting with these communities, seeing how aid affects them and talking about it. When we were in the United States having those weekly meetings where we discussed things, I think that was really eye-opening and helped a lot for me understanding how to go forward and how to support aid opportunities in the future. (R13)

Sebastian, Liz and Mia all had significant takeaways that indicate movement along the “active citizens’ continuum” which would be labelled a success for the purpose of Break Away or Branch Out. On Scheyvens’ (2011: 98) matrix of voluntourism, she lists ‘social action’ as the best possible form of international volunteering and defines it as “greater involvement of volunteers in social movements in the long term.”

2 While these learning experiences through alternative breaks are productive in creating a more aware and empathetic society, a causal claim that they generate more interest in becoming a “lifelong agent of change” is difficult to support (McGehee and Santos 2005: 764).
programs like Branch Out: to create a world of ‘active citizens,’ those who view community as their “priority in their values and life choices.”

Even if there is evidence of consciousness raising from alternative break experiences, alternative breaks still encourage students to use communities in the Global South as a training ground for personal development. Here is another reproduction of the anti-politics machine, while alternative breaks are ostensibly providing community development, their goal is distinct from this purpose: to develop the student volunteer. Only one respondent directly voiced this issue; Emily called it exploitative: “I don’t necessarily think it’s okay to use a learning experience from a place of privilege, it’s exploitation for your own educational purpose” (R01). Amid comments on how she valued her unique learning opportunity, Megan also recognized the potential for exploitation. She participated in SPIMA when it was a travelling clinic, and she realized that by virtue of being a volunteer from the Global North, she was given access to people’s intimate struggles that she would not have been as an untrained volunteer in her own community:

We had several patients, um, children that had like hernias or had extreme branchioma and they needed attention yesterday. And so, it was insanely special to go and see. But the problem with our organization was like we were there more for, ‘oh this is a novelty’ and seeing the spectacle of it. (R03)

Julia recognized that her work with SPAID fit into a larger “problematic system” but justified this by the personal growth she experienced which is reinforced by the alternative break model:

I feel like I don't really know if we did anything that impactful...like [two years later] I realized that I'm not sure how much we really contributed to the school building project. But I still really think that it was a really beneficial experience for me and the other students because we, you know, did learn a lot, even if it was sometimes negative, sometimes positive...I realize that it functioned into this wider problematic system. I also know that it taught me so much and it gave me so much perspective and it showed me what I want to do in life (R08).
When I asked what a student’s role in community development is, the most common response from the interviews was some elaboration of “to learn.” This is natural as the action that defines students is studying. But toward the goal of equitable international service, MBP and a volunteer force entirely made up of students cannot hope to provide the aid to communities that alternative breaks promise.

**Volunteer Critique of Modernization & The Anti-Politics Machine**

Volunteers also explicitly identified the organization’s failure to separate itself from modernization assumptions. They ultimately questioned the moral legitimacy of SPAID and the new development discourse, laying bare the workings of the anti-politics machine. These students critiqued MBPs in terms of its promise to foster equitable relationships in a world of inherent power dynamics and their critiques ultimately left them wary of international partnerships of any kind.

**Mutually Beneficial Partnerships.** When I conducted interviews, Sallie was the first to discuss the concern of power differentials when attempting to reach the unattainable goal of mutually beneficial partnerships, “I don't know if in reality a truly mutually beneficial partnership can exist between parties that come from different power backgrounds” (R04). Margo, concurs:

> I don't know if a mutually beneficial partnership is what we should be going for…the goal should be of equity [not equality] …In an ideal world, community partners and communities should get more from the experience because they’re going out of their way to invite students into their world. [Whereas] parties getting mutual benefit to me is like both parties getting the same amount of capital (R07).

In contrast to modernization, MBP recognizes that students also take from the service experience, they are not simply donors. Margo points out that students gain capital from the interaction that can be leveraged for future benefits but that technical projects left in the
community do not function in the same way. The lasting impact of building a public latrine in another country can serve to benefit a student from the Global North in a disproportionately greater way than it benefits community members unless structural issues are addressed. MBP does not fully capture the power difference between students and communities that change the ability to provide equitable aid.

Further problematizing MBP, Sallie argues it serves as a “coercive tactic for people to get involved…almost like students aren’t going to participate if they don’t feel like they’re getting something back” (R04). Sallie worked as a fellow at a small non-profit and part of her role was managing volunteers. This gave her a chance to view a MBP from the perspective of the community or non-profit partner. She recounted a time she brought in a group of 15 students to shred paper, “that’s a job no one wants to do…it’s so time consuming…but [with 15 students] you can get that done in like an hour…you’ve realized how meaningful even the smallest act of…manual labor is” (R04). But for students, this work may not seem as alluring as something more interactive with the people the non-profit works with. To Sallie, the promise of ‘mutual benefit,’ is more a method to get volunteers in the door than it is an attempt to sever ties with the modernization model. She goes on to argue, “Why do I have to benefit if I’m already coming from a different [socioeconomic] context?” (R04). Sallie advises that non-profits and NGOs end their use of MBP terminology because it goes against where the “body politic is moving, especially in America. I don't know if that's a sustainable way to get people to get involved” (R04). Sallie is identifying the tension between volunteers’ values and the inability of MBP to fulfill the promise of its ideal.

**Discordance.** As discussed, the purpose of an alternative break is to create a society of ‘active citizens.’ International service should inspire greater student interest and involvement,
potentially making ‘development’ or service parts of their career. There are many participants for whom this was the case: One person I interviewed considered becoming a nurse and changed her coursework senior year to take more biology classes as a result of her participation; two respondents began a long-term volunteering program after graduation, one in Ameri-Corps and another working as a fellow for a non-profit; two more started work at offices analogous to the Office of Community Engagement on other college campuses; another respondent went on to participate in a different international volunteer trip a year after her participation in SPAID; and another interviewee is a senior director of a public health program in India. On the other side, eight respondents out of the 16 expressed the desire to focus their future work on their local communities, citing “disillusioning” experiences with international volunteering in SPIMA/SPAID as the primary reason for this shift.

Many students were drawn to SPIMA/SPAID because they were already committed to service and wanted a learning experience outside of the communities they were more familiar with. Instead of encouraging greater interest in international volunteer work, SPIMA/SPAID had the opposite effect for many volunteers who expressed the desire to continue their volunteer work but to do so in the United States. Volunteers listed two main reasons for eschewing future international service work: 1) fear that their gap in knowledge and cultural understanding yawned too wide when working with communities in different countries; and 2) the gap in relative privilege made equitable social justice work feel too difficult if not impossible given the pre-existing neo-colonial power dynamics.

Meredith hoped that participation in SPIMA/SPAID would have a “profound impact” on her life but instead found that “it really didn’t.” She described voluntourism as cultural imperialism and said that she had decided it is “better to shy away from all of that” (R15). Izzie,
who had been on several alternative breaks, shared her doubt that community development could ever occur in short-term student trips: “I don't know that I've seen community development happening through alternative breaks. I don't know that I've ever seen that” (R16). Izzie did see value in short-term solutions closer to home, “doing after school tutoring or filing paperwork for a free health clinic or serving food at a soup kitchen.” Although she would not “classify those as community development” she saw them as important service opportunities (R16). Liz, one of the medical students I interviewed, explained that after working in Ghana she felt more drawn to domestic work because she had more context and less fear that she would “mess up.” She described SPIMA as the “wake-up” call to choose another career path than international work:

I was kind of **disenchanted** with what it meant to have an international volunteer-led trip…I felt more drawn to serving a community that I felt like I just had more **cultural competency**, I guess. I felt like my presence [in the United States] doesn't mess up as many things…if international service is your calling and your dream, absolutely go for it. I thought it was mine and then [SPIMA] was kind of a wake-up call to “oh, I don’t think it is.” (R05, emphases added).

Liz’s reference of cultural competency is an example of students taking concepts they learned during their time in SPIMA/SPAID and then using it to critique their experience with SPIMA/SPAID and inform their future involvements. Molly, used a similar term—cultural humility—and reasoning as Liz:

[SQAID] definitely affected me in that way of like my interests. I've leaned more towards working in urban areas of the U.S. as much as I welcome pursuing global health, at least for me I'm definitely more towards like working in New York City. Um, but I still think that a lot of those lessons carry over, New York City is such a diverse city with, um, with communities that are in some ways similar in terms of like, I'm very much an outsider and I have to learn how to respectfully inquire about the community and get to know patients and have some of that **cultural humility**. (R06)

Molly is also in medical school and she spent a year volunteering after she graduated from William & Mary. While in SPIMA/SPAID, Molly learned about cultural humility, or the ability to have an open-mind and respectful attitude about different cultures while also pushing oneself
to challenge their own culture and biases, and this has influenced her future work. But deeply understanding the importance of cultural humility has also made her feel more comfortable working closer to home. Like Liz, Kim had also believed that serving internationally was in the cards for her career path, but after participating in SPIMA/SPAID chose against it:

> Just thinking about my career, I think it was actually a really important trip for me because prior to that experience I was very set on wanting to work abroad. And as much as I loved the experience, it really kind of solidified that I actually don't want to work abroad. I want to work on public health domestically. (R12)

Mia also described the experience positively, but choose to “steer” away from international aid after working with SPIMA/SPAID:

> I think it's definitely had a long positive impact on my life and trying to figure out how to shape it and what things that I'm passionate about. But I've definitely learned what I don't like also about international aid. I've tried to steer clear of that as well. (R13)

Both Mia and Kim enjoyed the experience immensely and gained something from it, but they had no interest in repeating it. Sallie, an International Relations major, had also planned to include international service in her career plans, but left SPAID feeling frustrated with the lack of academic guidance:

> After SPAID I had a hard time with international development in general and my studies in [International Relations] at William & Mary very specifically kind of left me disillusioned with international work. I felt like I didn't have any academic experiences that really told me like, ‘this is not the way to do this.’ So, it was very much self-navigated, um, which was really frustrating. And so, I kind of turned away from that. Um, and now I work with like domestic need…and I think that it's just as important (R04, emphasis added).

Earlier in Sallie’s interview she discussed the need to “unpack” some of her own White savior tendencies and she decided she felt more comfortable doing that “work at home.” Sallie explained that after returning from her second year with SPAID and graduating from college, she found it difficult to find work she felt comfortable with, “I was really struggling because they kind of left me reeling, um, like I clearly wasn't prepared…and I don't know if this is the kind of
work that I feel comfortable doing” (R04). Emily had the same worry; after the program ended, she found it more difficult to imagine herself doing service work internationally:

After we ended up ending the partnership with [the NGO]…I was not necessarily interested in international development work and that I was more interested in working domestically and focusing on social justice issues that were close to home. (R01)

This decision was driven by frustration over SPIMA’s inability to transcend the critiques of voluntourism that were central to the organization’s legitimacy:

I was having a really hard time grappling with like the ethical issues of what it means to be a White, privileged, undergrad student who's not qualified to be working internationally…it created a power dynamics that we didn't necessarily feel comfortable in navigating…I never wanted to participate in a mission trip or like just a voluntourism trip. And to be honest, at this point that’s what it felt like. And so, I am disappointed that I could have participated in something that did not line up with my values (R01).

Emily was not alone in the feeling that she had participated in a program that was contrary to her own values. Margo explained that she was glad “we were asking questions about capacity building and sustainability, but on the flip side, like we weren't actually doing it” (R07). Liz (R05) told me she had felt “fooled into,” participating in an organization that could not follow through with its promises or values. I had not met Liz before interviewing her, but I had heard this sentiment from other participants I did know. As a leader of SPAID near its demise, I felt the same guilt and shame that some participants shared with me, but I was also the object of their ire for ‘fooling’ them into participating in a project they could no longer abide by. Working as a Development Coordinator for Branch Out, my primary goal was to recruit people based on our list of values. Each year SPIMA/SPAID had a team of students who were attracted to the organization because they saw it as values-driven, but, as Ferguson (1990: 256) warns, even the most intentional and well-planned projects are foiled when they attempt to generate change under the institutional conditions that create an anti-politics machine.
Conclusion

SPIMA/SPAID is not the only recent example of organizational demise at W&M. The year before SPIMA/SPAID ended its partnership in Ghana, another international alternative break under W&M Branch Out ended, and in 2018 another organization was dropped. As of the 2019-2020 school year, Branch Out was not sponsoring any international breaks. I do not know the reasons they ended these programs, nor do I know their histories. As an employee of Branch Out we discussed some of the same concerns that SPIMA/SPAID participants brought up in their interviews, and Branch Out did not have the resources to support international breaks. But the primary resource of an alternative break is students’ time and investment as Break Away advises these organizations to be almost entirely student-run. If these other two organizations ended their partnerships, it is possible that they lost the human resources from their student volunteers in a similar way that SPIMA/SPAID did. If these students’ choice to end their partnerships is akin to SPIMA/SPAID’s, what caused all three organizations to lose momentum within the same two years? Break Away has 250-chapter universities around the country and many of those schools operate international programs. I am interested in further study to learn if this is a phenomenon that extends beyond the William & Mary campus to other international alternative breaks and to determine how similar or different the reasons for their demise are in comparison to the SPIMA/SPAID case.

In this work, I argue that students, different from professional development practitioners, were able to abandon their project because of their understanding of the anti-politics machine or their perception of failure by “reproducing dependency.” I also recognize that employees of development organizations have a different stake in the “success” of development projects and arguably have a greater incentive to persist than students who will be involved in an alternative
break for, at the most, four years. Alternative break volunteers are not morally superior for their decision to end their partnership, especially as many incorporated modernization assumptions into their own worldview. But these volunteers entered the organization with an ideal that was impossible to achieve in the chosen structure.

Development as an industry is not the altruistic endeavor of reducing poverty and building a more equitable future. Development asks countries in the Global South to strive towards modernization by following a series of steps laid out by actors in the Global North who were fighting an ideological war against communism. In the 60 years since, development has not strayed far from this original intent. Countries have been strategically and systemically “developed” to more efficiently funnel capital from the Global South to the North.

As a result of globalization, we have more access than ever to the images and cultural products of communities outside of our own. With improved transportation, we can satisfy our curiosities by travelling; this desire is stoked by universities and employers who are also competing in an environment that has increasingly more global interactions. William & Mary students, clearly fitting the profile of likely volunteers, used the resources at their disposal to create an opportunity to help others while learning in a global classroom and gaining social capital. Alternative breaks gave students the chance to participate in a voluntourism experience while escaping the moniker of voluntourists and still being rewarded for their participation.

My thesis was two-part: first demonstrating how alternative breaks are still rooted in the modernization paradigm and operate as another arm of the neoliberal anti-politics machine, and second, explaining why volunteers would choose to end their partnership despite incentives to do the opposite.
As much as alternative breaks used critiques of voluntourism to avoid the problematic and ineffective aid facilitated by the anti-politics machine, in practice it slips right into the same pattern. In response to voluntourism, the theory ostensibly shifted with the hope of establishing sustainable and equitable community development projects; but SPIMA/SPAID’s ability to transcend the anti-politics machine was limited by their institutional context and underlying modernization assumptions, leading students to question the organization’s legitimacy. Several volunteers were able to clearly identify and effectively understood the structural issues at the root of the organization’s failures. These volunteers could no longer conscientiously continue their work, and many were so dissatisfied with their experiences that they chose not to pursue any more international volunteering opportunities—the opposite of the goal of alternative breaks. But the modernization paradigm is so pervasive, that many of these volunteers still reproduced this problematic discourse and ultimately blamed the community for the organization’s failure. I can attest to the power of this ubiquity as a year ago I too shared this sentiment and blamed the community. Other volunteers, who could not pinpoint the same structural issues and only relied on their modernization assumptions to analyze their experience with alternative breaks, still found fault with the organization. These volunteers understood the critiques of voluntourism enough to know they were seeking equity in community engagement and when they could not find it, they too rejected the organization and found it morally illegitimate.
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