





**UNIVERSITY ORGANIZATIONS ALLOW
STUDENTS TO MAKE AN IMPACT
BEYOND UA'S CAMPUS.**

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When the United States shifted its focus away from agriculture as a booming industry, in the last century, agrarian communities that once thrived began to struggle with increased poverty. One of these communities was Marion, Alabama, located in the Black Belt. However, it wasn't just a city with a great need; it was one where residents wanted to improve their community.

Eight years ago, Dr. Jacqueline Morgan, associate director of The University of Alabama's Honors College and director of the University Fellows Experience, searched with other faculty members for a community with which the college could partner and stumbled upon Marion.

The Black Belt Experience was born.

The program is one of many where students are provided the

opportunity to impact the community and world around them during their time at The University of Alabama. Whether it be through mentoring children, volunteering in the medical field or serving others locally and abroad, UA students are using their four years in Tuscaloosa to improve the world around them.

Reaching out to Other Regions

Black Belt Experience students apply to be a part of the University Fellows Experience their senior year of high school. These students are particularly interested in social

Black Belt Experience participants travel to Marion to do a variety of service projects.

change, although not always in traditional form, as they are studying a variety of majors. "This program allows students to think bigger about how they can make a difference in their community," said Davis Jackson, UA graduate and former University Fellows student. "And not just in a typical sense of you have to be a doctor, you have to be a teacher, but you can be an engineer and you can figure out ways that your career can allow you to make a difference."

Once students are accepted into the Black Belt Experience, they enroll in a spring course and travel to Marion where they meet with a community member and develop a



Black Belt Experience students volunteer in Marion's combined K-12 public school.

project targeted at an area of need. "It's a really cool opportunity for the community and for the students, but the community members make a complete difference in this process in that they have been so willing to mentor our students," Jackson said. "Every year they ask, 'When is our next group of students coming?' They are always asking questions of how can we be better to these students here at the Honors College at UA. That's a special partnership."

Students are involved in four project types: community development, health care, education and economic development. Many students end up working with schools, as the community has one K-12

combined public school, Jackson said. In the past, the Black Belt Experience has worked with high school-aged students on the college application process by developing résumés and interview skills, something that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. "This is an experience that a lot of UA students are passionate about, and we aren't unique in the fact that there are a lot of organizations and things on campus to get involved in," Jackson said. "I think it's something the University has committed to and really wants to give back to the state."

Mentors Making an Impact

While Black Belt Experience members travel to Marion, other programs focus directly on Tuscaloosa. More than 50 percent of Alabama K-12 students test below proficiency. However, in the last

five years, a group of Tuscaloosa elementary schools has reported improvement in student behavior, attendance and test scores, attributing a large part of those successes to one organization: Al's Pals. Housed in The University of Alabama's Center for Service and Leadership, Al's Pals strives to enrich the lives of elementary students by providing them with one-on-one mentoring by UA students. "It's really important that they feel like there is someone else in their lives who is interested in them and cares about them," said Lynette Campos, coordinator of the program. "A lot of times it's one of the more consistent things in their life."

College students are interviewed and placed at one of five sites in the Tuscaloosa community and are matched with an elementary student. Once a week for the duration

of a semester, mentors dedicate time to building positive relationships with their mentees through homework help and consistent interaction. More than half the mentors continue working with the program after their first year, and in some cases, work with the same student for consecutive years. “Having that support is really beneficial, and that consistency piece that there is always going to be someone there, every week for 10 weeks a semester, is really motivating for the elementary students,” she explained.

What started in January 2011 with just six mentors and 40 mentees has grown tremendously. More than 600 college students currently mentor approximately 300 elementary students as part of the program. With growth comes the increasing need for support and funding. Donations go a long way, Campos said, and what may seem so small to one person collectively keeps the organization going. “The need is out there, and as long as we can keep the quality good and the supplies that we need to facilitate what we want to do, I can see it continuing to grow.”

The elementary students aren’t the only ones benefitting from the program. UA students are developing beneficial skills in problem-solving, leadership and decision-making through the program. “They find out a lot about themselves,” Campos said. “A lot of them have found that this is their calling and have actually changed their major.”

Al’s Pals currently serves Maxwell, Central and Matthews elementary schools and Benjamin Barnes YMCA, and has plans to partner with Englewood Elementary. “It is so nice to see elementary kids happy and engaged and the positive role model that the college students



provide is refreshing and uplifting,” Campos said. “The smiles are worth a thousand words.”

Al’s Pals mentors provide a consistent interaction with mentees and participate in tutoring, crafts and more.

Making a Medical Difference

For students preparing to enter the medical field, the time commitment to homework, projects, research and shadowing can make it difficult to find ways to give back. For Lauren Matthews, a chemical engineering student at The University of Alabama, these responsibilities made her wonder if there were other students also struggling to volunteer on a tight schedule.

Matthews founded Bettering Bama, a program designed to give back to the community while engaging students in the medical field. Through this program, students can build patient interaction skills and exposure to their potential career.

Bettering Bama is involved with many programs, including Turning Point, Well Bama, the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center and Focus First. "One of my favorite programs that we are involved with is Focus First, and what they do is vision screenings," Matthews said. "You go into an elementary

school and you scan a couple different classes looking for potential eye problems. You get that patient interaction, dealing with the kids, but you're also seeing the health side of things."

Focus First in particular is special to Matthews, as she struggled with eye issues growing up. "I had glasses when I was three, contacts when I was in second grade; I was off the charts crazy," Matthews said. "We went to go do Focus First screenings at one of the schools, and we are scanning these kids, and one of the kids that popped up had the worst [eye issues]. He had a vision screening within the past year, but his vision had degraded so much over the course of the year that the lady I was working with said it was the worst (case) she had seen in her past two or three years of working. If you can't see, how are you paying attention? How are you functioning? It makes me really happy that we were able to catch this before it got worse."

Along with providing University

students the opportunity to volunteer in their field, Bettering Bama also participates in educational promotion for issues like HIV and diabetes. "We are always looking for places to go and volunteer. Our whole goal is that we want to help the community in places that they want to be helped, because we can go in and try and shove ourselves onto people as much as we want, but if they don't need us, then they don't need us," Matthews explained. "We also like to do education promotion, so if people feel there is a problem within the community, or an issue that they feel is taboo and nobody really talks about, we are always open to addressing that and getting the information out there."

Members of Bettering Bama participate in many community activities, including Hands on Tuscaloosa.





A Different Kind of Break

Students at UA are also reaching beyond state borders, making an impact abroad. Beyond Bama provides alternative break trips that give students the opportunity to travel to local, national and international communities and engage themselves in community-based service projects during University breaks. The goal is to create a mutually beneficial experience for both students and the community by running sustainable and ethical service trips in diverse environments. Since 1995, these short-term service trips have enabled students to experience, discuss and understand social issues in a significant way.

Dwyer Freeman, a student team leader for Beyond Bama, has always delved in community service, so being able to continue her involvement was important when choosing which college to attend. “I knew this is what I wanted to do, this is where I’m headed, this is something I will be doing throughout my entire college experience,” she explained.

The first trip she took through Beyond Bama was to Selma, Ala-

bama. Partnering with the Freedom Foundation, students spotlighted divisions within the community, learned why they are in place, and most importantly, what they could do to help. “It’s been the least changed by the change it has made for everyone else,” she said, referring to Selma’s role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Cat Cary, also a student team leader, found her love of helping others after a trip through the organization to Nicaragua, serving a community called Monte Tabor. Partnering with Panorama Service Expeditions, specifically designed for alternative break trips, teams collaborate with community leaders to determine specific needs. “I haven’t met someone on these trips whose life it hasn’t changed,” Cary said. “I changed so many things about my life and immediately joined the CSL to become part of the Beyond Bama team.”

She has returned to Nicaragua four times with Beyond Bama, building a school library and teaching English and computer literacy. This winter break, the organization will lead three trips to Nicaragua: one educational development trip, one economic development trip to the community of Santa Julia and a medical brigade.

One of the biggest draws of the program, Freeman explained, is that it allows students with time constraints a chance to volunteer. Alternative breaks provide students the opportunity to serve others outside of their hectic semester schedules. “I can’t commit to two hours after school every day, but I can commit to a fall break,” she said. “It literally pushes you out of your community into another community, and it makes your world a little bit bigger. It gives you a sense of shared purpose.”

Beyond Bama students travel to Nicaragua to provide aid in specific areas of need.

