

**Adult Jewish Learning Initiative: Community Market Analysis and Needs Assessment
Report of Findings**

Final Report: July 2016

Prepared for:

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Executive Summary

- We conducted surveys of focus groups of Jewish professionals as well as current and prospective users to assess the state of adult Jewish learning opportunities and interests, and possible growth trajectories.
- Demographics:
 - Most professionals devoted only a small part of their job to programming adult Jewish learning and they often had limited resources (budget, staff, and especially evaluation tools).
 - Most users were highly educated (with upper-level professional careers or currently retired), but most had relatively sparse Jewish educations. Current users overwhelmingly belong to a synagogue (84%) and do at least some of their learning there (78%). In contrast, only half of respondents who do not currently attend programs belong to a synagogue.
- Topics: Jewish history and Israel were most popular among nearly every demographic, while interest in Holocaust Studies has dropped over the past five years among them all. Social action/justice was a compelling, but not a leading topic with both current users and non-users, while textual study remained relatively popular only with the former. Notably, focus groups – largely made up of non-users – ranked arts and culture as most desirable. Programs generally match current interests, but there is some misalignment. Text and theology courses appeared most often, but in terms of student interest (as opposed to an institution’s self-perceived mission), both subjects are highly overrepresented. On the other hand, Jewish history still ranks relatively low in their schedules, despite users’ deep interest in this subject. “Literature, Films, Arts, and Culture” ranks higher, but still well below a clearly powerful popular interest.
- Program Success: Non-users preferred academics over rabbis as instructors while users liked both equally, but the most important criteria for a successful program according to all were the speaker’s passion, knowledge and ability to connect with the audience. Users prefer interactivity and seek to build community. The decision to attend was based first and foremost on the convenience of the day (Sunday afternoons and weekday evenings were

most popular) and of the location, with suburban and city users each preferring programs near their own homes.

Recommendations

For Adult Jewish Learning Professionals

- The number one unmet need listed by Jewish professionals was greater collaboration and coordination between institutions to maximize efficiency and opportunities. This need is confirmed by the data in multiple ways.
- Topic and format of programming should adapt to reflect these findings. Note, in addition to the topic findings above, that the lecture format with an interactive component clearly dominated student interest. In addition, programmers should consider the attraction of outside lectures, especially academics, which would again be more easily facilitated with a centralized module.
- There is a clear need for more professional development opportunities for programmers, and resources devoted to this.
- Program fees should reflect these results. Programs should cost between ten and twenty dollars per session, but more importantly, users should feel a sense of “value.” This could mean discounts for attending multiple events, but could also mean providing supplementary materials (e.g. a book by the author), other giveaways, or even just healthy food choices at the end of the event. This is something that professionals seemed to miss, and again an opportunity for a centralized resource to combine programs between institutions and offer that value to users. Fees should not be feared; they actually build a sense of ownership and investment in users.

A Centralized Community Platform

- Users and professionals alike demanded services that could be met by a centralized community resource, which would include calendar functions but also much more. This is not an inexpensive endeavor; such programs are expensive to purchase and maintain. But the payoff is substantial:
 - It allows institutions to pool funding, to coordinate visiting speakers (star lecturers were a clear ingredient to the most successful programs), and to track users' interests across venues and invite them to future events, something specifically mentioned in the various focus groups.
 - A central community resource would also allow users to be pooled in order to maintain less popular courses to which Jewish institutions are firmly committed, including both one-session programs of specialized focus or longer courses that require greater time commitment. For example, if two different organizations each offered a program on the same topic that both under-enrolled, there may be an opportunity to offer the program jointly to achieve a sufficient enrollment. A central community resource reduces redundancies, pools resources, and thereby improves quality and viability.
 - It could also facilitate the logistical support users want. Focus groups emphasized the need for clear explanations and repeated reminders of all material details: class dates, materials, fees, parking and transit information, garage discounts, background of speakers, etc.
 - It allows users to design their own program of study, drawing on resources available across the entire community.
 - Beyond sophisticated calendar functions, this centralized platform can host valuable, supportive resources (short readings, bibliographies, web links, etc.) to prepare in advance of programs and to allow users to continue on their own if they wish.

Introduction and Source Material

In 2015, Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership partnered with the Jewish United Fund (JUF) to conduct a market study and needs assessment of adult Jewish learning in the

Chicago area. The object was to include a mapping of the adult Jewish learning market across all venues – synagogues, day schools, JCC, higher education, public institutions, and more – with a particular focus on prior year offerings. (For our purposes, adult Jewish education means programming open to the broader Jewish community, including both religious or textual learning, as well as other forms of educational programming, as long as they are not specific to a single institution, e.g. programs for parents at a day school.) We sought to be as comprehensive as possible and intend to share the final results – including information on current program offerings and unmet needs – with the various constituents across the entire Chicago Jewish community.

In addition to formal and informal conversations with active Jewish adult learning programmers by project leaders, hard data was collected from multiple sources:

First, an online survey of Jewish community program providers was designed with input from the Chicago Adult Jewish Learning Professionals Group. The survey ran in late fall 2016 and yielded 42 responses. Approximately half of the participants represented synagogues, which reflects current programming opportunities in the Chicago area, with others coming from a wide variety of organizations. Most devoted only a small percentage of their job to adult Jewish learning programming, although some of them have been at their position for many years. Nearly all programmers have earned a graduate degree, but Judaica training is far more varied, including a number of professionals with no formal training whatsoever and others with one or two years in the Melton Program, although a few had a more substantial background. The survey focused especially on qualitative assessment of programming during the 2014-15 academic year, such as estimating the demographic range of participants as well as summarizing which topics, formats or schedules were offered and which tended to attract the most people. The survey also included a number of quantitative questions, including the approximate number of programs offered, whether they were multi-session classes or one-time events, and the approximate participation (and attendance) rates.

Based on the results from this survey, the group subsequently designed a more comprehensive online survey for current and potential program *users*, likewise balanced between quantitative and qualitative questions. This survey ultimately yielded well over

200 responses that crossed numerous demographic lines, though reflected a participation bias towards older over younger learners, and women over men. Users were asked about their programming interests, participation rates, preferred formats, and more. Approximately one-third of respondents do not currently participate in adult Jewish learning and were redirected to a parallel set of questions exploring what keeps them away and what would potentially attract them to attend.

Finally, we engaged the services of Leslie Rosen Stern, Managing Director of “Meeting your Mission,” to design and lead a series of four focus groups held on January 13 and 14, 2016. Two daytime focus groups were held at Spertus Institute in downtown Chicago and two evening groups were held at two sites of Jewish learning in the northern suburbs (JCC of Skokie and the BJE offices in Northbrook). Recruitment efforts for participation in these focus groups targeted Jewish adults who do not currently attend adult Jewish learning opportunities but might attend in the future, although the groups ultimately included some regular users as well. Approximately one third of participants had not attended an event in the past two years, but the nature of recruitment efforts dictated that all were predisposed to be involved and connected to some extent in Jewish life in Chicagoland. (The groups skewed even more than survey participants towards women, who constituted three quarters of the participants.) Participants were also paid a stipend for attending. The objective of the focus groups was to explore in greater detail than was possible in a static survey the participants’ habits, interests and preferences within the adult Jewish learning marketplace.

Demographics of Users

As expected, about two-thirds of our user-survey respondents were over 50 years old; three-quarters were women. This reflected almost exactly the assessment by Jewish professionals of the makeup of their event participants, particularly the age breakdown, although two-thirds of the institutions did state that gender presence at their events was about equal. (The rest leaned towards women.) Most users were professionals and highly educated, with 62% having earned a graduate degree, but most had relatively sparse Jewish educations. Only half had a bar or bat mitzvah, for example.

Among those who have used learning opportunities in the last three years, the vast majority belong to a synagogue (84%) and do at least some of their learning there (78%). Most also study outside the synagogue (75%), with colleges and cultural organizations the two leading alternative venues. In contrast, only half of those who rarely or never use services in the last three years belong to a synagogue.

Topics and Format

Most regular users (about 60%) attended only a few single-session programs last year, plus “1 to 5” multi-session programs. The vast majority who enrolled in the latter reported solid attendance. Jewish history, Israel, literature and arts, theology and textual study dominated student interest. In contrast, Holocaust and Hebrew language, among others, were surprisingly low. Least popular were conversion and adult bnai mitzvah courses, but this is to be expected as they speak to a very specific audience. Among those who currently do not attend programming, Jewish history and Israel also topped the list of topics they are most interested in, but textual study moved much lower down the list of preferences. Social action/justice was a compelling, but not leading topic with both groups. Notably, focus groups – largely made up of non-users – ranked arts and culture as most desirable.

Those involved in programming courses most often tried to choose topics based on student interest, and have in some instances assessed student interest well. **[See Tables 1.1 and 1.2 below]** Holocaust programming has dropped in recent years, for example, and Israel programming (at least in terms of interest) has a commanding presence. On the other side, the

number of Hebrew language courses is quite low, very much reflecting users' low interest in them.

There is some misalignment, however. "Bible and Talmud" by far dominates programming – to be expected considering the large number of synagogue officials answering the survey – and "Theology, Philosophy, Ethics, and Values" likewise ranks quite highly. Programmers may choose to focus on these topics for a variety of reasons, including ideological, but in terms of student interest, both subjects appear to be highly overrepresented. (In fact, many Jewish professionals admitted that Bible is not as popular as it once was, even as programming levels persisted.) On the other hand, Jewish history (other than the Holocaust) still ranks relatively low in their schedules, despite users' deep interest in this subject. "Literature, Films, Arts, and Culture" ranks higher, but still well below a clearly powerful popular interest.

Both regular users and non-users reported that (1) quality of instruction and (2) successful integration of a discussion/workshop component was most vital to them. In other words, the lecture format with an interactive component clearly dominated student interest. This point cannot be overstated. Focus group participants added that this interaction attracted them because it "built community" and "offered an opportunity to belong to something with like-minded individuals." Jewish professionals get this; lectures and multi-session courses dominated their programming. All users ranked academic faculty at the top of their list of desired instructors, while regular users and current non-users disagreed about rabbis as preferred presenters. The former were equally happy with rabbis while the latter ranked rabbis far lower. Programmers, in contrast, listed rabbis as their most common instructor, followed by academics and then others. This is expected, considering half of the programmers completing the survey came from synagogues, but programmers might want to consider the attraction of outside lecturers, especially academics. In any event, the most important criteria for a successful program – as both surveys and focus groups made clear – were the speaker's passion, knowledge and especially their ability to relate to the audience (hence their interest in an interactive component). Focus groups members in particular emphasized the need for

speakers to possess deep credentials and training, but also be “personable, charismatic, enthusiastic, charming, passionate” and yet, “humble.”

Topic certainly ranked high in users’ decision whether or not to attend an event, particularly among participants in the focus groups, but convenience of date/time topped the list with all groups. Weekday evenings and Sunday afternoons were by far the most popular times. (Saturday afternoon also received some votes but was a clear third-tier choice for all respondents, particularly for current users, well behind even Sunday mornings.) Jewish professionals know this; these time slots also were their most popular choices for programming. Critically, other users – older retirees, for example – preferred weekday afternoons. There needs to be some programming to meet that need, and thus this constitutes one of many areas that improved coordination between educational institutions would benefit all parties.

Finally, surveys also asked about on-line programming. Perhaps reflecting the age of most participants, less than a quarter of users took advantage of online learning opportunities, and few others expressed interest in exploring them. This was true of both current users and those currently disconnected from program opportunities; the percentage of on-line users in the two groups was almost identical. The number one reason for their disinterest, by far, was the lack of personal interaction that formed a core attraction of learning in the first place. (Most of those who did use indicated it was either to read Jewish news or else to look up specific facts or answers to specific questions, rather than to engage in any sustained virtual learning experience.) This reinforces the above conclusions regarding live programming. Jewish professionals’ use of on-line resources matches this exactly; only a quarter of programmers have an on-line presence beyond marketing.

Table 1.1: Topical Interest (Current Users)

	Very Compelling	Somewhat Compelling	Neutral	Less Compelling	Not Compelling	Total	Weighted Average
Adult B'nai Mitzvah	4.38% 6	12.41% 17	16.79% 23	8.03% 11	58.39% 80	137	4.04
American Jewry	18.57% 26	52.86% 74	12.14% 17	7.86% 11	8.57% 12	140	2.35
Bible or Talmud	45.64% 68	27.52% 41	16.11% 24	6.04% 9	4.70% 7	149	1.97
Comparative Religions	22.22% 32	37.50% 54	21.53% 31	9.03% 13	9.72% 14	144	2.47
Conversion	4.44% 6	8.15% 11	17.78% 24	8.15% 11	61.48% 83	135	4.14
Current Jewish Events	33.33% 48	42.36% 61	12.50% 18	7.64% 11	4.17% 6	144	2.07
Hebrew Language	25.35% 36	32.39% 46	19.72% 28	10.56% 15	11.97% 17	142	2.51
Health, Healing, or Caregiving	11.51% 16	30.94% 43	24.46% 34	12.95% 18	20.14% 28	139	2.99
Holiday Celebrations and Lifecycle Events	19.01% 27	36.62% 52	25.35% 36	7.75% 11	11.27% 16	142	2.56
Holocaust	17.36% 25	35.42% 51	24.31% 35	11.81% 17	11.11% 16	144	2.64
Israel	36.69% 51	40.29% 56	14.39% 20	2.88% 4	5.76% 8	139	2.01
Jewish History (Other than the Holocaust)	39.16% 56	46.15% 66	8.39% 12	3.50% 5	2.80% 4	143	1.85
Leadership	26.28% 36	25.55% 35	20.44% 28	9.49% 13	18.25% 25	137	2.68
Literature, Film, Arts, and Culture (Including Music)	40.71% 57	36.43% 51	15.71% 22	7.14% 10	0.00% 0	140	1.89
Parenting	13.53% 18	8.27% 11	27.07% 36	12.78% 17	38.35% 51	133	3.54

	Very Compelling	Somewhat Compelling	Neutral	Less Compelling	Not Compelling	Total	Weighted Average
Personal Growth and Spirituality	35.21% 50	28.87% 41	16.20% 23	6.34% 9	13.38% 19	142	2.34
Prayer and Religious Practices	25.34% 37	35.62% 52	21.92% 32	10.96% 16	6.16% 9	146	2.37
Social Action/Social Justice	27.46% 39	39.44% 56	21.13% 30	7.04% 10	4.93% 7	142	2.23
Theology, Philosophy, Ethics, and Values	34.97% 50	39.86% 57	16.08% 23	6.29% 9	2.80% 4	143	2.02
Other	16.67% 3	5.56% 1	27.78% 5	11.11% 2	38.89% 7	18	3.50

Table 1.2: Topical Interest (Prospective Users)

	Very Compelling	Somewhat Compelling	Neutral	Less Compelling	Not Compelling	Total	Weighted Average
Adult B'nai Mitzvah	5.00% 3	11.67% 7	16.67% 10	10.00% 6	56.67% 34	60	4.02
American Jewry	24.59% 15	42.62% 26	18.03% 11	4.92% 3	9.84% 6	61	2.33
Bible or Talmud	8.33% 5	38.33% 23	26.67% 16	13.33% 8	13.33% 8	60	2.85
Comparative Religions	20.97% 13	30.65% 19	30.65% 19	12.90% 8	4.84% 3	62	2.50
Conversion	1.69% 1	3.39% 2	18.64% 11	13.56% 8	62.71% 37	59	4.32
Current Jewish Events	45.90% 28	40.98% 25	4.92% 3	4.92% 3	3.28% 2	61	1.79
Hebrew Language	12.70% 8	28.57% 18	28.57% 18	17.46% 11	12.70% 8	63	2.89
Health, Healing, or Caregiving	15.25% 9	22.03% 13	28.81% 17	11.86% 7	22.03% 13	59	3.03
Holiday Celebrations and Lifecycle Events	17.74% 11	37.10% 23	22.58% 14	6.45% 4	16.13% 10	62	2.66
Holocaust	24.19% 15	46.77% 29	12.90% 8	8.06% 5	8.06% 5	62	2.29
Israel	46.67% 28	35.00% 21	11.67% 7	3.33% 2	3.33% 2	60	1.82
Jewish History (Other than the Holocaust)	44.62% 29	44.62% 29	6.15% 4	1.54% 1	3.08% 2	65	1.74
Leadership	22.41% 13	31.03% 18	20.69% 12	10.34% 6	15.52% 9	58	2.66
Literature, Film, Arts, and Culture (Including Music)	37.10% 23	41.94% 26	19.35% 12	1.61% 1	0.00% 0	62	1.85
Parenting	5.08% 3	10.17% 6	22.03% 13	11.86% 7	50.85% 30	59	3.93

	Very Compelling	Somewhat Compelling	Neutral	Less Compelling	Not Compelling	Total	Weighted Average
Personal Growth and Spirituality	22.95% 14	37.70% 23	16.39% 10	8.20% 5	14.75% 9	61	2.54
Prayer and Religious Practices	3.28% 2	24.59% 15	36.07% 22	13.11% 8	22.95% 14	61	3.28
Social Action/Social Justice	30.16% 19	39.68% 25	11.11% 7	11.11% 7	7.94% 5	63	2.27
Theology, Philosophy, Ethics, and Values	29.69% 19	40.63% 26	18.75% 12	7.81% 5	3.13% 2	64	2.14
Other	15.38% 2	23.08% 3	30.77% 4	0.00% 0	30.77% 4	13	3.08

Logistics: Location, amenities, and fees

As expected, users emphasized the importance of programs near their own homes. Those in the northern suburbs, for example, emphasized the need for programming there. People are willing to drive (or in some cases, take public transportation), but clear explanation of parking availability – and subsidy for parking if necessary – was important to many users. Focus groups emphasized their desire for clear explanations and repeated reminders of all logistics: class dates, fees, materials, parking and transit information, garage discounts, background of speakers, etc.

Cost deterred some people from attending at least some events - nearly one half of those who attend regularly and about one-third of those who don't – but most also reported that generally-speaking topic and format most determined whether or not they would attend (assuming the date and time matched their availability). To the extent that cost mattered, most users thought that ten to twenty dollars a session seemed fair, but members of the focus groups clarified that “value” and the feeling of having gotten a “good deal” ranked paramount. Discounts for attending multiple events, free giveaways (“swag”) or items that could be included in the cost of the program (such as a book), and similar promotions were extremely attractive to these groups. Healthy food and drink topped the list of suggested and desired features at the event's conclusion, but focus members also suggested a structure of extended interaction with the program's instructor, with follow-up invitations for related programs. (This is an area that coordination between institutions could much more easily facilitate; institutions could invite participants from related programs hosted by other institutions.)

Programmers seemed to sense the impact of a gifted instructor, as well as the importance of timing, but did not at all address the issue of “value” or material packaging that might attract more participants or entice them to come back. When asked about their most successful program, and what made it so successful, the largest number of programmers answered that the quality of instruction made the difference, many citing a visiting “scholar-in-residence” as the most successful program of the year. Ideally, institutions should be able to coordinate their invitation of such scholars, and either cosponsor events or minimize travel subsidies by having multiple events during a single visit to Chicago.

Programmers report typically spending under \$1,000 per program inclusive of all expenses, with only 20% of events costing more. Obviously, without collaborative partnerships and shared resources, this budget poses limitations on marketing, staffing, supplementary materials, evaluation and follow-up, etc. Funding comes overwhelmingly from two sources: targeted donations and budget allocation. Ticket sales are a close third, though probably constitute a higher percentage of funding for events that even have a fee. Professionals indicated that well over half of their programs have no fee, particularly for members of the institution. The presence of an outside speaker, and the added expenses this incurs, seems to be the most likely trigger for a fee.

Marketing

Print and radio ads, as expected, ranked very low on the list of media that reached participants. For regular users, word-of-mouth and organizational newsletters topped the list, with mass and personal emails just below it and social media below that. Non-users were reached by a more balanced array of media, although print and radio ads remained quite low. This was roughly reflected in the efforts of programmers to reach users. Programmers place little stock in paid print or radio advertising, although half invest in direct (post) mail that probably pays few dividends, beyond the important organizational newsletters, whose importance they should not discount. They also probably overestimate the reach of social media like Facebook, although that does reach many people and, in any event, it carries no cost. Users do not tend to visit the many organizational websites, suggesting that a centralized location of all Chicago offerings across every institution could prove far more useful.

Unmet Needs

As expected, professionals did note in the survey – and in other conversations – that there is deep need for programming that attracts and engages with young adults. Also as expected, users in various suburban areas emphasized the need for local events. However, the number one unmet need listed by Jewish professionals was greater collaboration and coordination between institutions to maximize efficiency and opportunities. The fact that institutions across the spectrum expressed such enthusiastic support for collaboration and partnership with other,

arguably “competing” institutions was one of the happiest surprises of this study. One respondent already anticipated this possible outcome of this study, writing that a “central clearing house” would serve professionals across the community, allowing them to avoid date conflicts, speaker and/or topic replication in numerous venues, and so on.