

Professional Development for Jewish Service-Learning Professionals

The Certificate of Completion Model

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From 2007-2011 the Department of Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University offered a post-baccalaureate level certificate of completion in Jewish service-learning. The program brought students with varying professional and educational backgrounds together to develop knowledge and skills required to succeed as purveyors and advocates of Jewish service-learning programs. This article details elements of the certificate program that led to its success and describes intended and unintended outcomes achieved by the program.

Between 2007 and 2011 the San Francisco State University Department of Jewish Studies, in partnership with San Francisco's Bureau of Jewish Education, trained nearly 30 Jewish community professionals to work as Jewish service-learning (JSL) professionals.¹ The Jewish Service Learning Certificate program (JSLC) offered a postbaccalaureate-level certificate of completion in JSL. Designed for Jewish communal professionals, the two-semester professional development course engaged students in exercises of theory and practice that would enhance their ability to successfully use JSL pedagogies at their institutions. These individuals came to the course with varied backgrounds in Jewish learning, service activity, and exposure to Jewish communal life. What they shared was a desire to deepen their own knowledge and thereby enhance their ability to create engaging and impactful programs. Although some had previous experience with service-learning, most were new to the notion that service activity could be linked to their program's curricular content and their agency's core Jewish values and mission.

To date, the Jewish Service Learning Certificate program offered through San Francisco State University (SFSU) is the only JSL training program of its kind. Students met with the course instructor in person rather than in a distance-learning format. Because all students and the course instructor were engaged in work with local Jewish communal agencies, the program emphasized building a local community of practice rather than helping students make national or international connections. The course followed a traditional academic calendar and

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¹The course is no longer being offered because of a decreased need in the community: alumni of the program are continuing to work in the field and to share their knowledge with others.

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offered depth and breadth that are challenging to achieve in shorter seminar-style or retreat-based programs. The SFSU name offered some cachet and seriousness to the class.

The primary outcome of this program was to provide high-quality professional development for Jewish communal professionals as a strategy to normalize JSL in the San Francisco Bay Area. To this end, the JSLC sought to increase the knowledge and skills of professionals working in informal and formal Jewish settings to provide attractive, engaging, and meaningful service-learning opportunities within a Jewish framework. Student learning outcomes of the program included the following:

1. Understand the dimensions and best practices of service-learning
2. Gain knowledge and learn about resources that will help integrate Jewish history, literature, philosophy, and ethics with the service-learning experience
3. Increase knowledge, skills, and application of service-learning activities as a pedagogic tool
4. Learn about the structure of Jewish service organizations and other community resources
5. Develop as professionals with increased knowledge and skills in education and youth development practices (when appropriate)

The course was taught five times by three instructors over its four-year run. Summative and formative evaluation data were used to refine the course for each cohort. This article draws on lessons from all five cohorts to describe the most effective course structure, syllabus, and pedagogies as well as key learnings from these areas. The article also describes the course's impact on JSLC alumni and on the community.

WHAT WE DID: COURSE DESCRIPTION

The JSLC was taught over a nine-month period (August–May) and required student participation in 60 semester-hours of classroom instruction. Students earned two transferable graduate-level units of study for each semester successfully completed through San Francisco State University's College of Extended Learning. To be eligible for the course, students needed a minimum of two years of professional experience in the Jewish community and to be currently employed in a Jewish communal agency. To show students the importance of responding to different learning needs of JSL participants in formal and informal educational settings, the course was taught using a variety of teaching modalities. Every class session had a service-learning topic and a related Jewish idea, which were explored individually and in relationship to one another.

The course was organized around two types of academic study: theory and practice. The educational theory components of the course included graduate-level and professional readings about service-learning, evaluation, and leadership by scholars such as Ron Heifetz, Joel Westheimer, Joe Kahne, and Susan Slick. One service-learning textbook was required, the second edition of Cathryn Berger Kaye's *The Complete Guide to Service-Learning* (2010). Students also read the Nathan Cummings Foundation study, *Visioning Justice and the American Jewish Community* (2008), and reviewed a variety of multimedia resources and websites.

A study of Jewish ideas in the course provided students with an opportunity to experience a nexus of theory and practice. Students studied primary and secondary Jewish literary resources including selections from the Hebrew Bible, Babylonian Talmud, and contemporary Judaic thinkers such as Joseph Telushkin, Art Green, Bradley Artson, and Jill Jacobs.

In-class assignments were designed to capitalize on both students' professional experience and their understanding of course readings. A combination of lecture-style presentations and individual and small group exercises shaped the in-class learning experience and connected it to the students' professional roles. For example, exercises using the National Youth Leadership Council's *K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice* (2008) helped students understand the relationship between their organization and Jewish and non-Jewish community partners. Written and experiential homework assignments focused on a variety of practical applications of course theory to their work. The course's capstone assignment was to create a project that would enhance or develop JSL at their agency of employment. Other course assignments throughout the year provided a scaffold to the students' capstone project and gave them the opportunity to develop or hone professional skills: students conducted a service issue research project, participated in reflective exercises, studied and taught Jewish ideas, and taught sample lessons related to their capstone project. Students also learned how to use a logic model as a strategy for outcomes-based program planning, strategic program development, and supporting institutional change.

WHAT WE LEARNED: COURSE DESCRIPTION

Although the pilot course was taught spring–fall, the subsequent and more effective timing of the course followed a fall–spring model and met every other week for three- to four-hour sessions. This timing kept the learning within one academic and Jewish year and effectively matched agency and communal planning timelines.

Mandatory attendance at all class meetings helped students build relationships with one another and establish a much-needed community of practice with other JSL professionals; it also helped those few students who had less than two years of professional experience draw more meaning from their course work. Students regularly worked together in assigned pairs for *chevruta* text study and in assigned small groups as critical colleagues focused on program development. Working together in these formats laid the foundation for connections among classmates during and after the course around specific resource issues and collaborative projects. Many of the relationships created in the classroom have continued beyond the conclusion of the course.

For all cohorts, the course's integration of theory and practice was critical to the students' ability to synthesize and apply course material to their work: students were able to turn their work setting into an experimental lab for Jewish texts, strategies of organizational leadership, and pedagogies for their formal or informal learning environment. For example, as students studied why crafting outcome statements is a critical step in developing a logic model they also engaged in the process of articulating outcome statements for their JSL program. This direct application of ideas helped bring the course material to life for the students and helped them make immediate changes at their agencies. One

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student observed that the weekly reflection prompts she responded to in class were advancing her learning. She started using similar reflection prompts in her weekly e-mails home to the families engaged in the JSL program she ran. Additionally, students in each cohort commented that the JSLC offered them a chance to think and study in ways they had not done in years—this was especially true of students who had been out of university (BA or MA level) for more than five years.

COURSE IMPACT AND KEY LEARNINGS

The Jewish Service Learning Certificate program had four key areas of impact: influencing the self-image of the Jewish community professional, supporting the development of program and leadership skills, providing an opportunity for ongoing Jewish learning, and advancing the professionalism of JSL.

Influence the Self-Image of the Jewish Community Professional

Many of the individuals who self-selected for the certificate program were educators in Jewish settings such as residential and day camps, synagogue schools, or Jewish day schools. However, some identified as Jewish community professionals but not as educators. They did not perceive the work they did—whether as the development professional, the volunteer coordinator, the young adult program coordinator, or the extracurricular programs coordinator—as having educational value for the people with whom they worked. These individuals thought of their work as primarily administrative or behind the scenes. If they ran programs they often invited a guest educator for a session rather than leading it themselves. For these students the certificate program proved to be transformative of their professional identity. For example, one alumna reflected in an end-of-year evaluation, “I never considered myself a Jewish educator until I took the Jewish Service Learning Certificate course, where I realized that every point of contact with a volunteer, a young adult or a child, is an educational opportunity and should be treated as one” (Bureau of Jewish Education, 2009).

For other students, the course provided a sense of purpose and direction for their work and a validation of their efforts at their agencies. One student, empowered by knowledge and skills developed through the course, was able to confidently open an agency staff meeting with an effective Jewish text study or *d’var torah*. Students began to understand the influence they could have throughout their agency, and several students now meet with senior staff at their agencies and/or with lay leaders in efforts to incorporate JSL into their agency cultures. The course also provided an opportunity for students to realize the critical role of community partnerships in communal work and the possibility of JSL as a strategy to connect people and organizations. Through course assignments they also had the opportunity to engage in and practice skills required for negotiation, conflict resolution, and bridge building between and within community organizations.

Support the Development of Program and Leadership Skills

Most of the students who enrolled in the JSLC program had accidentally landed in the field of Jewish communal service. A midcareer change or a job right out of college with Hillel, Jewish Family and Children’s Services, or the local Jewish

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Community Center turned out to be fun, nourishing, and meaningful so they stayed beyond the one or two years they intended. Yet by that third year people began to realize that, although they loved the work, they lacked formal training in some of the critical skills necessary to succeed. The SFSU certificate program offered a way for individuals to fill their programmatic and Judaic educational gaps. Students studied outcomes-based program design and spent hours writing and refining program outcomes, something rarely done in the busyness of agency life. They examined techniques for formative and summative evaluation and discussed strategies for organizational leadership, strategic planning, and relationship building. Students worked in small groups and also received extensive one-on-one coaching from the course instructor in the areas of program and leadership skills development. They repeatedly expressed gratitude and appreciation for the personal and nuanced direction they received through the resource-intensive approach to individual learning.

Provide Opportunity for Ongoing Jewish Learning

Perhaps the greatest impact of the course resulted from the ongoing and regular Jewish learning done in class and in homework assignments. The course, offered by the Department of Jewish Studies at a public institution, made clear that the inclusion of Jewish text and ideas was not intended to influence the individual's religiosity or theology but rather to prepare the professional for work in Jewish communal agencies. Familiarity and comfort with Jewish texts and ideas were understood as fundamental knowledge and skill sets to enhance the work of any Jewish communal professional and especially of individuals engaged in leadership and pedagogic roles. The Jewish content presented in class often included texts and ideas that students had not studied before.

All students in every cohort identified the Jewish learning as one of the most valuable elements of the course, even though they came to the course with a variety of experiences with Jewish text, language, and ideas. Students in each cohort expressed appreciation for the opportunity to step out of their busy lives and think about the core foundational ideas that guide their work. They enjoyed the chance to “unpack” ideas commonly used in Jewish settings such as repairing the world, *tikkun olam*, or keeping the Sabbath, *shmirat shabbat*. Students who lacked formal Jewish education relished the exposure to Jewish expression of human values such as kindness, *hesed*; acts of loving-kindness, *g'milut hasidim*; or justice, *tzedek*. As one student noted in an end-of-year evaluation, “All [Jewish ideas taught in the course] were interesting and seemed to have practical implications for teaching in a service-learning context” (Bureau of Jewish Education, 2010).

In addition to professional transformation, some students experienced personal transformation, an unintended outcome of the program. At the conclusion of their programs, one student expressed a desire to travel to Israel for the first time to deepen her Judaic studies, and another described experiencing new meaning at communal prayer services at her synagogue as a result of a new understanding of the ideas being discussed.

Advance the Professionalism of JSL

Recognizing that JSL is a specialized form of experiential or project-based learning, the JSLC was designed to provide students with a depth and breadth of knowledge and skills specifically intended for use in JSL settings. For example,

although Jewish values are discussed in a variety of Jewish educational settings, when students studied Jewish texts in the JSLC they were prompted to consider questions specific to using the text in a JSL setting; for example, What social issues could this text relate to? What would resonate with your students about this text? What might challenge your students about this text? How might you use this in a preservice learning session? How might you use this in a postservice reflection? What informal conversations might this text prompt during a service activity with your students?

When working with Jewish texts students learned how to find and navigate Jewish source documents (i.e., *Tanakh* and Talmud), use Hebrew and English texts in their teaching, and access and use commentary on biblical and liturgical texts. By looking for a specific passage from the Torah or Prophets in an actual copy of the *chumash*, the Hebrew Bible, rather than being given a handout of a selected text, they learned how to contextualize a passage of text as well as to locate it. Talmud study that modeled working both in mono- and bilingual texts engaged students in layered study that they could replicate in their programs. Reading and discussing contemporary Jewish texts and commentaries heightened the relevance of Jewish text to the work of JSL professionals and provided them with additional access points to the ancient texts.

Students did not, however, study Jewish text in isolation from academic texts on service-learning, leadership, or logic models. They were regularly asked to consider a secular text and overlay Jewish ideas as well as apply secular ideas to a Jewish text. The course provided them a framework to think through the big ideas presented by the texts so that they would be prepared to help their students engage with these ideas. For example, the week the students worked with literature about learning communities, they also explored the idea and practice of *chevruta* learning. And when the students examined a service-learning program that helped students “see” homeless people in a new light, they considered Jewish traditions and blessings related to opening the eyes—*pokeach ivrim*.

The JSLC helped individuals, agencies, and the local community move toward embracing JSL as a normative piece of Jewish program offerings and to recognize JSL program leaders as professionals with desirable skills and knowledge. To that end, the course’s emphasis on praxis meant that influence on programs and agencies was often immediate; its emphasis on critical collegiality meant that JSLC participants were not alone in making efforts to change the nature of their work. It was this integration of the Jewish learning tradition with the service-learning tradition that contributed to the JSLC’s uniqueness and success. Students would return to their workplaces and engage their supervisors, colleagues, and program participants in the exploration of new ideas. JSLC participants generally received positive feedback about the changes they brought to their programs and institutions as they used JSL as a teaching strategy to reach their programmatic and organizational goals. Over the years both alumni of the JSLC and agencies that integrated JSL into the fiber of their organization’s educational approach have received positive feedback from a variety of stakeholders about the success of their efforts.

CONCLUSION

A 2009 alumna reflected on her experience in the program in this way:

The Jewish Service Learning Certificate class...has been an invaluable experience on many levels. First and foremost I have found a collegial environment with others working towards social justice. Second, the instruction has formalized what I intuitively knew about service programming, allowing a more professional presentation of projects to my superiors and outside agencies. Finally, I feel more comfortable with the relationship between service and Judaism as the SFSU instructor has been fabulous about incorporating the historical and religious components of Jewish texts into the practical application of service. I wouldn't trade this life-changing experience for anything (Bureau of Jewish Education, 2009).

Of the nearly 30 alumni who earned a certificate in Jewish service-learning at SFSU roughly two-thirds continue to be engaged as educators or advocates of JSL programming in the Jewish community. Through their work in the program they wrote JSL curricula, integrated Jewish learning into already existing service programs, and developed new JSL programs where none had previously existed. They built relationships within their own organizations and with community partners to ensure high-quality learning for their JSL program participants and that high-quality service was enacted in the community.

The course relied heavily on the articulated student learning outcomes as a framework for building and refining the student learning experience. Teaching and learning experiences in the course were personalized and tailored to meet the needs of each small cohort, enabling the development of long-lasting relationships. The course proved to be transformative for students in professional and personal ways and provided new learning experiences that were immediately relevant and connected to their professional work.

As these professionals continue on their Jewish community career paths some will move out of their jobs, some will be promoted to senior-level positions, and some will stop working as professionals and become lay leaders. It is hoped that the foundation they received in JSL through the Jewish Service Learning Certificate course will influence the decisions they make about community priorities. One alumna, approximately one year after completion of her certificate and after launching a JSL program at her agency commented,

Now more than ever, I am incredibly thankful that I participated in the JSL Certificate Program. I credit a great deal of the success of the [JSL program I developed] to my having participated in the JSL program. I am so pleased that my eyes were opened to the wonderful service-learning world (pokeach ivrim shall we say?); it will hopefully continue to be a cornerstone of my career for years to come (JSLC 2009 alumna, personal communication, May 25, 2010).

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Preparing Service-Learning Professionals: Lessons From Training Experiential Educators

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Service-learning is, by definition, action oriented. Service activities hold enormous potential to engage learners in repairing the world, but there is the potential for these activities to end up as one-offs that may (or may not) be interesting and enjoyable, but provide minimal impact within the variety of other interesting, enjoyable experiences that Jewish youth encounter. The work of skilled educators is a crucial mediator to the impact of service-learning programs. Over the past ten years, the Davidson School at JTS has trained master's-level students to enter the field of "informal" or "experiential" Jewish education, including service-learning. Davidson has also recently embarked, for program development purposes, in ongoing consultations with leading professionals in the field. Here, we discuss two broad lessons we have learned from this work.

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