
Opening the Black Box

Lessons From Research on Immersive Jewish Service-Learning Programs for Young Adults

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Short-term, immersive, Jewish service-learning (IJSL) programs have emerged as a key communal strategy to encourage Jewish young adults to engage in service and see their volunteer work as a Jewish act. Utilizing two years of multi-method research, this article opens the “black box” of IJSL pedagogy, suggesting that group cohesion, quality of service work, interactions with community members, learning sessions, Jewish observance, and follow-up programming are critical to participant outcomes, including connections between Jewish identity and service and plans to engage in future volunteer work and to volunteer under Jewish auspices. The article also explores the limitations of current recruitment paradigms, which often result in gender-imbalanced groups with a history of strong Jewish engagement. It recommends that the IJSL field engage in a process of external scanning for innovative ideas, foster a culture of experimentation and “demonstration projects,” and integrate feedback systems into planning and decision making.

What we want to change we curse and then pick up a tool.

Marge Piercy (2000)

The American Jewish community has renewed its commitment to young adult volunteering both within and beyond communal borders. Recent research indicates that the majority of contemporary Jewish young adults engage in volunteer work, but for most it is an infrequent activity, neither performed under Jewish auspices nor seen as a Jewish act (Chertok et al., 2011). Short-term, immersive, Jewish service-learning programs have emerged as a key communal strategy to engage Jewish young adults in service and help them to see their volunteer work through the prism of Jewish tradition, values, and identity (Irie & Blair, 2008). Service-learning specifically refers to programs that integrate meaningful volunteer work with instruction and reflection (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2010). Immersive service-learning programs enable young adults to step outside their lives, travel in small groups to communities

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both domestic and international, and engage in seven or more days of concentrated volunteer work.

Research on immersive Jewish service-learning (IJSL) programs suggests that participants gain in their commitment to taking an active role in “repairing the world” and come to see service as more central to their Jewish identities (Beck, 2007; Chertok & Samuel, 2008; Rehnborg et al., 2008). However, the research is silent on the contribution of different elements of the immersive service-learning experience to these outcomes. The term “black box,” borrowed from engineering, describes a type of program model that describes the inputs entering the system and how they are expected to look after exiting, but the processes by which inputs are transformed into outputs is metaphorically hidden from view within the opaque box (Bateson, 1972). If the field of IJSL is to develop a maximally effective pedagogy and establish empirically based standards of practice, it will need to move beyond a black box model of these programs.

In this article, we take the first steps to opening the black box of IJSL programs. Our goal is to explore the connection between specific components of those programs and participant outcomes, such as plans to engage in future volunteer work and the ability to make connections between Jewish identity and service. Our conclusions are based on two years of research on Break New Ground, an IJSL initiative sponsored by the UJA-Federation of New York. From 2007–2009, 371 young adults participated in Break New Ground with the largest and best known providers of immersive Jewish service-learning.

To study IJSL programs from multiple perspectives, our research used a variety of methods (Denzin, 1970). All participants received surveys at several points in time including before and shortly after their program. Participants in the first year of Break New Ground also received a follow-up survey one year after they completed their program. Response rates for all surveys ranged from 89% for the preprogram survey to 64% for the one-year follow-up. Members of our research team also accompanied groups into the field from each of the JSL provider organizations. In addition, we conducted interviews and focus groups with participants and service-learning group leaders.

The article begins with a brief overview of related research on service-learning for young adults. The focus then moves to the lessons learned through our research about the role of various program components in immersive programs. We close with discussion of the import of these lessons for the developing field of immersive Jewish service-learning.

RELATED RESEARCH

Because service-learning developed as a pedagogical strategy it is not surprising that most of the research focuses on secular programs structured around academic courses on college campuses. This research indicates that service-learning has a greater impact on college students’ sense of civic responsibility than volunteering by itself (Astin et al., 2000). Service-learning courses also enhance students’ commitment to civic engagement and strengthen their leadership and problem-solving skills (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Moely et al., 2002). By contextualizing service in an educational framework, students gain a better understanding of the causes of social problems and feel greater personal responsibility to work toward their resolution (Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998). This

educational strategy also appears to have an enduring impact, fostering integration of service into self-identity and prompting a continued commitment to volunteer work (Jones & Abes, 2004).

The limited research on immersive service-learning that is not course-based finds that, although these programs have less effect on participants' civic engagement than semester-long alternatives, they do foster a sense of compassion (Eyler & Giles, 1997; Mills, Bersamina, & Plante, 2007; Plante, Lackey, & Hwang, 2009). Undergraduate participants in Alternative Break style service programs also shift their attitudes toward a less judgmental perspective on the poor (Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005).

THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMMERSIVE JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING

Recruitment: The First Hurdle

IJSL programs are intended to reach young adults from the full spectrum of Jewish identity. However, most Break New Ground participants had strong Jewish educations and were already immersed in Jewish life. For example, almost half had attended Jewish day schools, and many described themselves as very involved in or even as leaders of Jewish activities. Compared with national surveys of American Jews, Orthodox Jews were overrepresented among Break New Ground participants, whereas secular or nonreligious young adults were underrepresented.

If service-learning is to become a central feature of the contemporary Jewish young adult experience, recruitment must be positioned to reach beyond the "usual suspects" and appeal to all Jewish young adults, involved and uninvolved. In the second year of Break New Ground, we observed an innovative and successful approach to recruitment. A campus-based Jewish organization used the release of a documentary on poverty in the community to which they would be traveling as a recruitment tool and targeted undergraduates inspired by the film. Information about the upcoming immersive program was shared with faculty teaching classes on related subjects such as poverty, education, economics, social work, and sustainable development. As compared with the participants recruited during the previous year on the same campus, the recruitment efforts during the second year resulted in a more diverse group, many of whom had only tangential connections to Jewish life. Indeed, interviews conducted during their immersive service-learning program indicated that participants specifically remembered watching the documentary and jumping at the opportunity to translate their newly raised consciousness into action. This case study echoes a recent research finding that Jewish young adults care deeply about issues of social and economic inequality and demonstrates that this commitment can be leveraged to attract a wide variety of participants to IJSL programs (Chertok et al., 2011).

Echoing research on secular and Jewish immersive service-learning, women were overrepresented on Break New Ground programs, constituting 75% of participants (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Rehnberg et al., 2008). This consistent gender imbalance requires further attention in the field of IJSL. The preference of men to seek volunteer work that is related to their paid work or intended career may need to be incorporated into planning and recruitment for JSL programs (Little, 1997). Social network factors may also play a prominent role in young men's

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decision making about volunteering, suggesting that recruitment efforts be targeted to preexisting groups such as fraternities, clubs, and circles of friends (Chertok, Sasson, & Saxe, 2009).

Our research on the training of IJSL group leaders also suggests that they are an underutilized recruitment resource. These group leaders come from the full spectrum of Jewish backgrounds and closely resemble the desired mix of JSL participants (Chertok et al., 2010). They are also an impressive group, and their wealth of experience and commitment to service are compelling to Jewish young adults.

Impact of Program Elements

Life on IJSL programs consists of a number of activities. Participants interact with other members of their group and local community residents, engage in volunteer work, attend learning and reflection sessions, and observe Shabbat together. Statistical analysis allowed us to identify the program elements most strongly related to three intended outcomes of immersive Jewish service-learning: intention to increase service involvement, intention to increase service involvement under Jewish auspices, and development of connections between service and Jewish identity.

Group Cohesion On immersive programs, including Jewish service-learning, the group is the context for learning and the conduit through which participants develop the skills, attitudes, and memories they will take away from their experience (Reimer, 2008; Saxe & Chazan, 2008). The vast majority of Break New Ground participants felt that their groups were cohesive communities. They shared their insights, joys, and frustrations and looked to each other for support when the work was difficult.

The group was a lifeline for those who needed anything, from a hug to medical help; it definitely became a supportive team unit. It was also a wonderful group for exploring new ideas and thoughts about the world and social justice.

Group cohesion was a significant predictor of plans to become involved in future Jewish-sponsored service. There are several possible explanations for the impact of group cohesion on participant outcomes. Cohesive groups that work well together may lead participants to experience a sense of collective efficacy—the power as a group to effect changes that they could not achieve as individuals (Bandura, 2000).

Group cohesion on IJSL programs may also give young adults the unique opportunity to live and work side by side with peers from very different Jewish backgrounds. The divide between religiously observant and nonobservant Jewish young adults in Jewish settings is repeatedly noted in the literature (Chertok, Sasson, & Saxe, 2009; Sales and Saxe, 2006). The IJSL experience of working and living closely together, as equal peers, and in the service of shared goals is the exact condition most conducive to reducing prejudice and stereotypes (Gaertner et al., 1990). At their best, IJSL programs create an accepting group dynamic within which participants explore commonalities as well as differences. Indeed, many Break New Ground participants felt part of a unique group experience that expanded their notions of Jewish identity and community.

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On other trips, I was with religious and nonreligious people but we never stayed together in the same room long enough to get to know each other. I think it was just really good for all of us.

I didn't think there were people [in the group] I share my values with. But being here and seeing the curiosity and genuine interest that people displayed by digging deeper into issues—it's about people coming closer, being able to participate in something.

However, we also observed that groups were infrequently encouraged to grapple with issues of Jewish religious diversity and that pluralism was not an explicit topic of learning sessions. As a result some Break New Ground participants felt unsure and uncomfortable with differing approaches, and within some groups this tension eroded cohesion. For example, on one program non-Orthodox participants felt that the plan to observe Shabbat in a very traditional setting was “religiously coercive,” and they were especially aggrieved that they did not have the opportunity to discuss these plans as a group. Related research on group leaders in the field of immersive Jewish service-learning indicates their desire for additional training on dealing with difficult group dynamics, especially those that arise in groups with wide variations in level of Jewish observance (Chertok et al., 2010). The potential of IJSL programs to foster a cohesive group dynamic requires that Jewish diversity become an explicit and integrated thread in group development and learning.

Quality of the Service Performed Motivated by their strong desire to help those in need, Break New Ground volunteers left behind their classrooms, comfortable homes, and dorm rooms and offered their time and energy to different causes. The more participants saw their work as important and helpful to the communities in which they served, the stronger their intention to increase their involvement in volunteering after they returned and the greater the connection made between their Jewish identity and their volunteer work. This echoes research on secular service-learning, which finds that volunteer work that is perceived as meaningful is associated with positive outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1997). It is also in keeping with empirically developed standards for service-learning in grades K–12, which state that the service performed needs to both engage participants and address an authentic community need (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008).

Whether they painted bomb shelters, installed drywall, rebuilt fences, planted trees, dug irrigation trenches, or cleaned cemeteries, the majority of Break New Ground participants felt that the work they did was important and helped them to grasp more fully the challenges faced by the local community. One college student explained that the highlight was “waking up every morning and knowing I’d be making a difference.” Although groups struggled with the enormity of the problems they observed, most felt that their very presence was a powerful way to “bear witness” to economic and social injustice.

What we were doing was a physically demanding task, but I took it on head first. I tried to do the best I could, and our combined efforts really have made a difference that you can see.

However, this sense of making a meaningful contribution was markedly diminished when service work was disorganized or felt like “busy work” disconnected

from the needs of the local community. For example, problems with transportation and lack of coordination with local organizations left some groups concerned that they were not spending enough time in productive work.

Some days were disorganized. We were driving around trying to find places. Other times we woke up early and ended up waiting for hours to get transportation.

Other groups felt they did not have adequate instruction or the resources needed to complete their work properly. For example, one group arrived at the work site prepared to paint, only to find that the proper supplies were missing. Even after waiting several hours for the right materials to arrive they realized that the walls had not been properly prepared. With each pass of their paint rollers, pieces of masonry fell to the ground. This group left their day of work frustrated, demoralized, and questioning their ability to make a difference in this or any community.

We observed that IJSL programs and their local community partners set the tone for serious volunteer work by investing the time to set expectations, train, and supervise participants. These efforts are especially important for manual labor tasks with which most volunteers are unfamiliar. When participants are not adequately trained or ill equipped, the quality of work is often substandard. This is a detriment to the local community, and it leaves participants concerned that the resources (human and financial) needed to support immersive service-learning programs might be better used in some other way.

Interactions With the Recipient Community A study of individuals who demonstrate sustained commitment to work for the common good found that many recalled a “constructive, enlarging experience of the other” that challenged their assumptions about who was and was not inside their personal sphere of obligation (Daloz et al., 1996). Break New Ground participants saw firsthand the consequences of domestic and international poverty and, perhaps more difficult, poverty within the Jewish community. For example, one group volunteered in Israel, and even though all the participants had previously traveled there, it was eye-opening to meet Jewish Israelis living below the poverty line.

The majority of Break New Ground participants reported positive interactions with members of the local community and found these to be among their most meaningful experiences, prompting them to ask serious questions about justice and fairness. The quality of interactions with local residents significantly affected the degree to which Break New Ground participants made connections between their service work and their Jewish identity.

It's been meaningful to see how other people live. I am still grappling with questions: why was I born into a family in New York, and that little girl was born into a poverty-stricken country with little opportunity to improve herself?

You don't really realize how impoverished these people are until you see for yourself in their homes. We thankfully witnessed it firsthand when we went into their houses on Shabbat.

Participants from more observant backgrounds reported that Break New Ground dramatically expanded their sphere of obligation beyond the Jewish community. These young adults came into the program with communal volunteering experience, but often had not worked with other populations.

I realized on this trip that a part of being Jewish is taking care of your neighbors just as well as you take care of yourself, whether they are Jewish or not Jewish.

However, there were several situations that diminished the impact of community encounters. Participants on some programs were concerned when they did not see the community's voice represented in the choice or execution of projects. This sense of disconnection from the local population only increased when groups worked at different service sites each day or even within the same day.

There was no collaboration with the local community on the service project. The local residents asked us who we were, what we were doing, and why—they were not expecting us and did not have the opportunity to voice their needs and concerns.

In some cases interactions with local residents were interpersonally challenging. Clearly, difficult interchanges can bring issues of privilege to the forefront and instill a sense of “productive discomfort.” However, when there was no adequate or timely opportunity to explore and understand these experiences, participants were left feeling like unwelcome interlopers and questioned their role in addressing social injustice. For example, members of one Break New Ground group were taunted sporadically throughout the week by a small group of local residents. Although participants were clearly upset and frustrated by these negative interchanges, the program staff did not address these incidents until many days later, and even then the discussion was about racial relations in the abstract rather than focusing on the group's experience in the neighborhood.

Learning and Reflection Sessions In course-based service-learning programs the educational component is often separate and distinct from both the volunteer work and the opportunity to reflect on that hands-on experience. On immersive service-learning programs, including those under Jewish auspices, reflection and learning often take place in close temporal and physical proximity to the volunteer work and can be addressed within the same session or include components of each other. Our research indicates that the effectiveness of learning and reflection experiences is significantly related to the intention to increase service involvement. A reflective learning process that is active, engaging, and challenging has also been tied to positive outcomes of course-based service-learning (Astin et al., 2000). At their best, learning and reflection sessions helped participants frame their service work, examine their values, and develop a broader understanding of the root causes of social injustice.

The trip greatly affected the way I view problems in the nation and the world. I now more fully understand the way social justice is indelibly linked with issues of race, class, and economics.

Effective learning and reflection also encouraged participants to embrace a Jewish imperative for their commitment to service and social justice. On Break New Ground, this shift was especially important for those who came into the program with a strong focus on service, but with a sense that they did not have the Jewish “credentials” to claim a Jewish foundation for their volunteer work.

I didn't really realize how attached service was to Judaism because it's just been a natural part of my upbringing. So wanting to help people, I didn't realize that there's actually a religious basis for it too.

I'd never seen [Jewish] texts before. I thought that they were really interesting, they really related to what we were doing. I found myself going through the next day's work thinking "Oh, that kind of fits."

However, not all learning or reflection sessions were equally effective, nor did they work equally well for all participants. Just over half of Break New Ground participants were very positive about their learning experience, but almost as large a proportion did not find these sessions to be interesting or to engage them at an appropriate level. Participants with less Jewish education, knowledge of Hebrew vocabulary, or familiarity with traditional text study told us that they found the content and process of learning sessions to be foreign and even overwhelming. Participants with day school backgrounds commented that they were already familiar with the texts used and did not feel adequately challenged. One-year follow up data indicate that Break New Ground had the greatest influence on strengthening the Jewish perspective on service of the latter group. These participants had entered their service-learning experience "primed," with a pre-existing framework of Jewish knowledge and a history of text study that made it easier for them to quickly acclimate to learning sessions and absorb new Jewish ideas and perspectives.

One of the core principles taught to service-learning group leaders is "we meet them where they are" (Chertok et al., 2010). This is a valuable perspective pertaining not just to participants' knowledge and understanding of poverty and privilege but also to their familiarity and comfort with Jewish content and modes of study. As IJSL programs begin to draw young adults from the full range of Jewish backgrounds, participants will increasingly enter programs with substantial gaps in their Jewish knowledge. The challenge is to prepare group leaders and to develop resources to meet the educational needs of participants from diverse backgrounds without creating segregated "tracks." IJSL providers may need to develop curricula with multiple options or jigsaw lessons so that some aspects of Jewish learning are done in groupings that respond to different needs and backgrounds, whereas others provide the opportunity for all participants to learn together on an equal footing.

Jewish Observance Jewish life on IJSL programs typically includes keeping kosher and celebrating Shabbat. All Break New Ground groups marked Shabbat with at least one special meal, and some also attended synagogue, participated in learning, hiked, or spent time getting to know local residents. Participants who found the observance of Shabbat and other Jewish rituals to be meaningful were significantly more likely to say they planned to participate in both service and Jewish-sponsored service and more likely to make gains in connecting Jewish identity to service. It must also be noted that the impact of Jewish observance was the same for participants regardless of their level of Jewish background.

There are several potential explanations for this finding, all of which relate to the uniqueness of the experience. The salience of a particular element of personal identity, such as being Jewish, is often strengthened when it is explored within new and unfamiliar contexts (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Experiences of Jewish living on immersive service-learning programs are often unique because of the settings in which they occur. Baking challah in a Central American jungle or

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singing psalms at twilight in the hills of West Virginia are situations that stand out and encourage participants to think about their Jewish identity in new ways.

Life on an IJSL program can also be unique because it is Jewish. Research on young adults raised in non-Orthodox homes indicates that most have limited Jewish education past their early teens and few experiences of the weekly rhythms and rituals of Jewish home life (Chertok, Phillips & Saxe, 2008). For many participants from less observant backgrounds Break New Ground marked their first celebration of Shabbat as adults. Regardless of why it is unique, Jewish life on IJSL programs is a distinctive experience and paves the way for connecting volunteering to being Jewish.

By the time Shabbat left, I looked at the group of people with me, and I said, this is a really special thing that we're doing. It's a very unique experience, and it's my own.

Unfortunately, Jewish living on Break New Ground programs was all too often characterized by missed opportunities to engage in formal or informal learning about tradition and ritual, making the experience of Jewish observance less meaningful and distinctive. For example, one group shopped for food at a local market in preparation for their meals. The leader reminded participants that everything they purchased should be kosher and distributed sheets displaying the appropriate symbols. Unfortunately, staff did not take the time to discuss the purpose, history, or modern relevance of the kosher dietary laws, especially in relation to issues of food justice.

The Important Role of Follow-up

Even before leaving to return home, many Break New Ground participants talked about their desire to continue the work they had started on their service-learning programs. Some groups discussed how to advocate and teach their friends about the issues they encountered, whereas others were fully intent on continuing to aid the communities they served in Southeast Asia, Central America, the Former Soviet Union, Israel, and the United States. Unfortunately, just one year later many alumni regretfully admitted that they were unable to sustain their focus and that attempts to organize follow-up projects had fallen through.

We were going to send them care packages. We had all these follow-up plans that never took off.

Inspiration is fleeting, it's like a wave—you see it and then it crashes. That was our trip. I wish there was more direction to keep that going.

Our research found that significant increases in volunteer activity were seen only among alumni who participated in follow-up meetings or projects. Unfortunately, IJSL programs often do not include a follow-up component. Group leaders, who are typically part-time employees, are not available after the immersive experience ends. Even campus personnel with portfolios that include service frequently report being too busy with other volunteer efforts to serve effectively as the mentors of returning JSL groups (Rosin, 2010).

Jewish young adults want to “make a difference” (Chertok et al., 2011). Unfortunately, like volunteers in school-based service-learning programs, many Break New Ground participants returned with a diminished sense of personal agency (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). It is not difficult to understand that

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encountering the scope and severity of social problems leaves young adults with doubts about their ability to organize or implement change efforts. Effective follow-up efforts may play a critical role in helping participants reclaim their sense of agency.

The transformative experiences that young adults have on IJSL programs can be leveraged into more enduring service commitments. For example, the initial steps of follow-up projects can be started while participants are still away from the responsibilities and distractions of their everyday life. Dedicated staff might pick up work with these groups where the immersive aspect of programming leaves off. Follow-up programming/curricula might include advocacy, service, and fundraising activities related to the work of IJSL providers and communities served, or to related issues in participants' home communities or campuses. Geographically or topic-based leadership circles of JSL alumni might also be developed. As one writer has warned, "Without follow-up, the very success of immersion programs can be their downfall: Jewish experiences can come to be seen as otherworldly vacations that have no bearing on or relevance to everyday life" (Valley, 2008, p. 2).

Participant Characteristics and History

Young adults do not come into IJSL programs as blank slates, and it is not surprising that their background and attitudes influence the outcome of these programs. For example, Break New Ground participants who were more strongly motivated by the desire to help others or address social issues also left the program with stronger intentions to increase their service involvement. Jewish identity and involvement also played a role. Even when accounting for the impact of the service program itself, participants who entered Break New Ground with stronger Jewish identity and a history of involvement in Jewish activities also indicated stronger postprogram intentions to increase their participation in both secular- and Jewish-sponsored volunteer work. They were also more likely to strengthen the connection between service and their Jewish identity. This is in keeping with other research findings that religious involvement is associated with engaging in community service among college students and more specifically among Jewish young adults (Chertok et al., 2011; Marks & Jones, 2004).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Effective education has been described as weaving together multiple strands of emotional, intellectual, and hands-on experience (Shulman, 2004). At their best, IJSL programs are exemplars of this type of multisensory pedagogy. They give Jewish young adults the opportunity to engage as part of a supportive group in work that is both gratifying and meaningful, to have authentic encounters with communities facing very different challenges from their own, to reflect on and draw larger lessons from their firsthand experience, to translate their expanded sense of responsibility into action after they return, and to claim their inheritance of a Jewish mandate for caring for those in need and working toward social justice (Jacobs, 2009).

The research described in this article begins but does not complete the process of opening the black box of immersive Jewish service-learning. It is clear that components of the immersive service-learning experience such as group

cohesion, quality of service work, interactions with community members, learning and reflection sessions, and Jewish living are critical to the success and lasting impact of these programs. When done well, these elements can make the difference between an enjoyable Alternative Break experience that amounts to no more than a fleeting drop in the metaphorical bucket of service engagement and a transformative experience that leads to enduring and expanding ripples of personal and communal change. The research also makes clear that JSL programs do not always deliver on these components. We are still a long way from having a full understanding of why these program elements are so important or how they work to effect change. There are also aspects of the immersive service-learning experience that are likely to be important but were not addressed in our research such as the role of group leaders.

The field of immersive Jewish service-learning has entered a process of growth and refinement, working to establish its pedagogy and define best practices. Toward this end, IJSL providers, individually and collectively, might benefit from conceptualizing their efforts as those of a “learning organization” (Senge, 1990). Among other characteristics, learning organizations foster a culture of experimentation and integrate feedback systems into their planning and decision making. In other words, the field of immersive Jewish service-learning might benefit from instituting a tradition of “demonstration projects” to try out different approaches to each of the key program components identified in this research. Lastly and critically, from our perspective the field needs to commit resources to collect systematic data about the impact of these innovation efforts and about the lasting impact of these programs more broadly. The ultimate success of this burgeoning field rests on the development of high-quality experiences with demonstrable long-term impact on both participants’ service commitments and understanding of this work as an expression of their Jewish identity.

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Jewish Service Learning: Analysis and Caveats

Chaim Lauer

This brief overview raises problems inherent in implementing successful Jewish service-learning programs and offers strategies to address them, which build on and extrapolate from both recent general studies on service-learning and historic Jewish “learning by doing” experiences. They include a protocol for setting priorities within service-learning programs, a nationwide structural addition to enhance service-learner recruitment and build community in the long term, and a basic paradigm shift on how the community functions to meet its ongoing challenges.

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