Exploring the Future of Alumni: Part 2

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Organizations across the Jewish community and beyond invest significant dollars in training programs for educators and others. At a certain juncture, these individuals are labeled “alumni” and organizations work to keep alumni connected to their specific program and organization.

Part 2 of this four-part series inspired by a gathering hosted by M² explores the role of setting and raising expectations of alumni and the potential of alumni to have an influence well beyond their graduating program.

**Raising Expectations**

By Aaron Steinberg

When I started working for the Bronfman Fellowship three years ago, I was hired as the Manager of Alumni Relations. It was very enticing to look at the 700 alumni I was responsible for engaging as a community for me to serve. The word “concierge” was often in my lexicon. It took time
for me to realize my role isn’t to “serve” alumni: while some do want a full-service experience, most alumni actually want to be part of creating and investing in something that is already important to them and that, ultimately, helps them form a stronger connection to our organization.

At Bronfman, this means alumni are empowered and encouraged to plan their own events, serve on committees with real responsibility, and engage in their own network weaving. We are setting higher expectations for our lay leaders, most of whom are our alumni. This means setting them up in the driver’s seat with our support – such as by providing better-defined job descriptions for our alumni as they take on board and committee roles – and helping them to hold one another accountable.

It can be enticing for professionals with years of experience to approach an alumni effort with confidence and a commitment to provide solutions. We tell ourselves: We know what works and what doesn’t work. We’ve seen it tried every way a dozen times. It takes trust in the process to step back and say, “let them build it themselves.” But they may make mistakes; we won’t agree with every decision. But we’ll be there to support; we’ll give them advice. And I’ve learned that when we raise our expectations, our alumni will rise to the occasion, often with even better results. Sometimes, we just need the confidence to hop over to the passenger’s seat and let alumni steer.

The Power of Alumni to Do Good
By Aimee Weiss
Institutions that take participants through transformational learning experiences, such as training programs or immersive experiences, command great potential to leverage relationships formed during the programs. At a time when the word “alumni” is often reduced to banal jargon, what really is its value, and what is the purpose of the deep relationships between institutions, individual participants and visions that last? To achieve their visions, how should institutions weigh the alumni-institution relationship against the relationships that they aim to foster between participants and their broader mission in the world?

Programs don’t own participants; participants should own the vision that programs seek to address. Infrastructure and activities can be constructed toward a collective higher purpose and better perpetuate the systemic changes they seek to transition.

Tachtitic (specific) change occurs well beyond the fixed boundaries of these programs. A training program may present as transactional – participate through graduation to receive knowledge and a certificate – but we hope that the program will have greater influences. These powerful experiences can inculcate people with broader, purpose-driven missions. According to David Brooks, New York Times opinion writer, “A thick institution becomes part of a person’s identity and engages the whole person: head, hands, heart, and soul.” Thick institutions that produce alumni wield platforms far greater than a simple alumni coordinator or fundraising mechanism could ever capture. How might institutions take better advantage of transformative learning experiences to arouse the greater power of their alumni to do good?
Aaron Steinberg is the Deputy Director of The Bronfman Fellowship. Aimee Weiss is a Senior Program Officer at Maimonides Fund.

**Read more insights about alumni in Part 3 of Exploring the Future of Alumni in tomorrow’s article, “Building More Expansive Alumni Networks,” by Cheryl Cook and Rachel Glicksman of Avodah.**

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