

# The Consumer Reports: Hiring of Entry-Level Jewish Communal Workers\*

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*This study has found some definite inconsistencies between what executives express as needed by workers as the background necessary for work with the unique problems and nuances of the Jewish community and the way the expressed needs are translated into hiring practices. . . . an ongoing formal dialogue among all interested parties should be encouraged.*

THE search for trained, knowledgeable and competent Jewish communal workers is of vital interest to our Jewish communities today. It has been estimated that the current number of paid staff, excluding congregational rabbis, working in American and Canadian Jewish communal agencies may number between 10,000 to 12,000 individuals<sup>1</sup>. The literature over the past century concerning Jewish communal service has attempted to define competencies and interrelationships among the professionals working in the field. While the debates continue as to whether Jewish communal service is a profession in itself, or a conglomeration of professions, there is agreement

as to the common purpose of Jewish communal agencies: to "serve" the Jewish community and "preserve" it<sup>2</sup>.

This paper describes a study that offered executives, from a spectrum of Jewish agencies and settings, an opportunity to reflect on professional needs, desired competencies, and hiring considerations for beginning workers. The authors were interested in learning if there was a trend in agency hiring practices toward workers with graduate training in Jewish communal service. The findings demonstrate that there is a lack of significant hiring standards which is in contrast to the employer's explicit need for specially trained entry-level workers.

## Method

In this study, a pre-coded questionnaire was developed and mailed to 283 communal executives throughout the United States and Canada. The executives of Jewish agencies and settings represented in the sample were from Federations, family service and community relations agencies, national membership organizations and affiliated synagogue movements from the large- and large-intermediate sized Jewish communities. Of the 283 question-

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald B. Bubis, "Confronting Some Issues in Jewish Continuity: The Response of the Profession," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (1978), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph I. Goldman, "The Role of the Professional in Developing and Shaping Jewish Communal Policies and Strategies." Presented at The International Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Jerusalem, August 23-28, 1981.

naires, 182 or 64.3 percent were returned, demonstrating the importance the executives gave to the study. A significantly higher percentage of Federation, family service and community center executives responded than community relations and membership organization executives.

### **Essential Competencies of the Jewish Communal Worker**

As more attention has been devoted to Jewish purposes in the work of the agency, more attention has been placed on the type and quality of professionals who provided the service. Leaders in the field of Jewish communal service, such as Goldman,<sup>4</sup> Bubis<sup>5</sup> and Dubin<sup>6</sup>, have argued that while advances have been made in the ability to serve the Jewish community, even greater gains can be made by defining basic essential qualifications and demanding them of aspirants. The literature consistently demonstrates the varied and extensive list of desired competencies. The literature acknowledges a need for an effective blend of knowledge, values, skills, methods, experience and personal qualities. While this study did not attempt to find definitive methods in how individuals are chosen for positions, it did attempt to delineate present hiring patterns.

The respondents were given the opportunity to identify the essential competencies they considered necessary for success in the field. Two categories of desired competencies were evaluated:

- 1) Jewish knowledge components
- 2) Generic skills and methods

<sup>4</sup> Ralph I. Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald B. Bubis, "Professional Trends in Jewish Communal Practice in America," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (1980), p. 305.

<sup>6</sup> David Dubin, "Achieving Jewish Substance: Developing Bridges Between Objectives and Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (1975), p. 12.

### **Jewish Components**

The researchers were interested in assessing how executives perceive the preparation of all entry-level Jewish communal workers for utilizing Jewish components in practice. Employers were also asked whether they were satisfied with how their workers were satisfactorily applying this knowledge.

Approximately three-fourths of all executives would like their workers to apply a greater knowledge of Jewish values, knowledge of the organized Jewish community and contemporary Jewish issues. However, a significant number of the executives indicated that their entry-level professionals are inadequately or not at all prepared to utilize them. (See Table 1 Appendix) While many more workers with strong Jewish backgrounds are now entering the field of Jewish communal service, they are nonetheless viewed as being unaware of how to translate their knowledge into practice in a way discernible to their employers.

Approximately half of the executives also indicated that a knowledge of ritual practice, Jewish history and ethnic groups was an admirable asset. All of these areas are purported to be emphasized by the programs of Jewish communal service. There is, unfortunately, no way to discern whether executives who have hired graduates of the programs are more satisfied with their utilization of these components. Workers cannot appropriately use knowledge that is not learned, nor would executives expect competency in areas with which they themselves, are not comfortable. For example, Jewish family service executives were least likely to expect competency in Jewish components, and they were ambivalent about the usefulness in practice. Jewish community center executives were the most eager to have workers with greater competencies in areas of Jewish knowl-

edge, yet this field of service demands the most diversity among its staff. (See Table 2 Appendix)

### **Generic Skills and Methods**

Not only did the findings reveal that a majority of executives desire their workers to have a greater knowledge of Jewish components, but there were commonalities among agencies in the value given to generic competencies as well.

Executives were asked how often entry-level professionals were expected to use generic skills and methods. Seventy percent of all employers indicated that they expect entry-level workers, at least occasionally, to use all the competencies listed with the exception of lobbying and computer skills. The list included work with lay boards, fundraising, community organization, casework, program development and public relation skills. While significant differences in expected use exist across agency settings, trends in the data continue to demonstrate the universality of certain generic skills. Therefore, entry-level communal workers are expected to have specializations and some degree of competency in skill and method areas not necessarily associated with their field of practice.

### **Bridging Jewish Components With Generic Skills**

Several of the executives desired that more emphasis be placed on skill development by the programs of Jewish communal service. Several executives commented:

Better preparation is needed to engage in the day-to-day tasks of work in the field . . . more "how to" rather than "why".

The schools of Jewish communal service are doing fine on values and attitudes. They need to do better on skill development . . . not at all knowledgeable about how to do things within Jewish communal service.

Such comments demonstrate that the programs carry a great responsibility, bridging Jewish components with practical skills. As indicated by the results of the survey, greater emphasis on one without the other is insufficient.

### **Hiring Considerations**

A Jewish communal worker, like any other potential employee, obtains a position based upon a set of attributes and the meeting of certain criteria. The researchers were especially interested in examining the role of professional education as a standard hiring consideration among all Jewish agencies.

While specific graduate education in Jewish communal service was viewed as a somewhat important hiring consideration among Jewish Federation and community center executives, it was rated significantly lower in importance than other considerations, especially personality and previous work experience. Among the other agency settings, graduate education in Jewish communal service was not a very important hiring consideration. (See Table 3 Appendix)

Graduate education, in general, is perceived to be an important hiring consideration for entry-level practice. However, the findings further delineate the diversity among agency settings and individual employers in the differing emphases given to specific graduate education in Jewish communal service. By tradition social work remains the most recognized professional discipline for all Jewish settings, with the exception of community relations and the membership organizations. However, social work education, by itself, does not adequately meet all professional needs. When combined with practical knowledge in the application of Jewish components, social work becomes very attractive, especially to Federation and community center executives. There

also is interest among all executives in a variety of degree options (now offered by several programs) integrating Jewish communal service. (See Table 4 Appendix) The need for the diversity of backgrounds is apparent for work within the Center movement. The comment of one respondent reflects this growing trend among Center executives:

. . . I would like to point out that in our hiring practices in the Center field, we are constantly looking for people with Bachelor's and Master's degrees in physical education, pre-school education and adult education, as well as in the cultural arts . . . people who are trained in social work and Jewish communal services are not prepared for these positions, and they make up to as much as 50% of the professional staff in the average Center.

The trend toward other disciplines is not unique to Jewish community centers. Executives from community relations agencies have indicated that the curriculum offered by most of the programs does not meet their professional needs. The programs must address this issue in its search to find some degree of unity among the diversity.

Some Jewish communal service students are beginning to graduate with combined degree plans other than those grounded in the traditional social work model. Their impact on the field is not as well known, but would seem to be quite promising from the results of the study.

There has not been a similar study attempted since the study by the Committee for Jewish Social Work in the 1940's<sup>3</sup>. In that study approximately 975 communal work executives responded to a questionnaire examining the necessary preparation, background

and commitment needed for success in the field. Those findings revealed that one-sixth of the executives reported that they had no specific requirements in employing staff for Jewish agencies. An additional one-third did not answer that question. Therefore, one-half of the executives either had not considered Jewish requirements or reported little or no hiring experience. The employers' hiring practices were most influenced by the degree of their own Jewish schooling, home backgrounds and early Jewish training.

The results of the current study demonstrate that forty years later, there is still lack of commitment among the leaders in the field to recognize the need for specially trained Jewish communal workers. This finding contradicts the expressed desire, also found in this study, for more competency in areas of Jewish knowledge, utilization of Jewish components in practice, the development of programs and schools in Jewish communal service.

### A Creative Tension

The employers were also asked who should take the lead in defining the essential competencies of the Jewish communal worker, the training programs (schools) or the field? One-half of the respondents believe that "a creative tension" should exist between the training or educational programs of Jewish communal service and the field. The other half was divided as to whether the programs should "lead" or "follow". The professionals are essentially calling for a dialogue between the programs and the field.

The researchers conclude that a council of representatives from the programs and the field should meet on a regular basis to share needs and help review curricula. There is a definite misunderstanding among the executives of the agencies as to what the

<sup>3</sup> Philip Bernstein, "Training for Jewish Communal Service," *Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1947), p. 70.

schools and programs purport to accomplish. The programs, for the most part, purport this integration of Jewish components in practice to be their mission and the executives have indicated a desire for better trained workers.

The dialogue should result in establishment of hiring standards, financial incentives for students seeking graduate training in Jewish communal service, salary incentives for entry-level workers who graduate from the programs, and perhaps even a form of certification. Development of hiring standards would contribute to a quality and competence of workers. With the replies from the field having indicated that certain general competencies are desired in all agency settings, standard requirements would assure that new workers would possess these competencies according to the level of their positions. Whether employed in Los Angeles, Birmingham, or Harrisburg, the type and quality of work in a specific agency would be consistent.

The salary level might also become standardized through the adoption of hiring standards. Currently, salaries do not appear to differ for those with specific training in Jewish communal service from those without (all other variables being equal). Standards might alleviate this situation, and therefore

increase the quality of applicants available to less accessible or desirable communities.

The Conference of Jewish Communal Service might also play a key role in the dialogue between the educational programs and the executives. As the National Association of Social Workers formulated certification requirements and lobbied for licensing, so too might the CJCS.

The attitudes and perceptions among Jewish communal executives form patterns as complex as the interrelationship of the components of Jewish communal service: programs, graduates, executives, lay leaders, professional organizations and agencies. This study has found some definite inconsistencies between what executives express as needed by workers as the background necessary for work with the unique problems and nuances of the Jewish community, and the way the expressed needs are translated into hiring practices. The programs of Jewish communal service are relatively new, constantly experimenting with new approaches and, in some cases, the integration of various disciplines. In order to meet the needs of the field, an ongoing formal dialogue among all interested parties should be encouraged.

## Appendix—Tables

Table 1

**Jewish Knowledge Dimensions that Executives Would Like Entry-Level Workers to Use More in Practice and in Which They Find Them to be at Least Adequately Prepared**

	Would Like To Be Used More (%)	Adequately Prepared or Better (%)	Valid Responses N = 173
Jewish Values	82.1	58.2	151
Organization of the Jewish Community	77.7	40.5	153
Contemporary Jewish Issues	74.0	51.3	150
Jewish History	52.0	42.0	150
Ethnic Groups	53.6	55.7	149
Ritual Practice	48.9	49.6	149
Jewish Literature	35.3	23.3	150
Scripture	27.5	18.1	149
Hebrew	21.1	19.1	147

Table 2

**Areas of Jewish Knowledge That Executives Would Like Used More (By Agency Setting\*)**

	JF	JFS	JCC	CR	OTHER
Jewish Values	85.4	81.1	82.4	82.4	67.9
Organization of the Jewish Community	87.8	64.9	83.3	94.1	67.9
Contemporary Jewish Issues	82.5	48.6	88.1	88.2	75.0
Jewish History	53.7	33.3	61.9	64.7	57.1
Ethnic Groups	36.8	72.2	42.9	76.5	57.1
Ritual Practice	37.5	56.8	64.3	17.6	46.4
Jewish Literature	35.9	16.2	54.8	35.3	35.7
Hebrew	30.0	13.5	45.2	25.0	25.0
Scripture	26.8	13.5	35.7	29.4	33.3

\* This collapsed table presents the percentage of valid responses made by agency executives for each of the nine areas of Jewish knowledge they believe workers should use more in practice. Executives were asked to respond to each of these components on a scale of "would like to be used more" through "would like to be used less." There was also a "not relevant" response.

Table 3

**Considerations in Hiring Entry-Level Jewish Communal Workers by Agency Setting (Percentage That Rated Items Listed Below as "Extremely" and "Very" Important)**

	JF (N=43)	JFS (N=38)	JCC (N=43)	CR (N=19)	OTHER (N=28)
Personality	93.1	89.4	100.0	100.0	96.4
Previous Work Experience	88.4	84.2	81.4	68.4	75.0
References	65.1	48.6	65.1	47.4	57.1
Graduate Degree	51.2	83.8	51.2	10.5	39.3
Resume	46.6	51.3	39.5	42.1	50.0
Prior Jewish Education	58.1	29.7	48.8	26.4	46.5
MSW	28.6	94.8	43.9	0.0	18.5
Coursework	34.9	27.0	11.6	5.3	21.4
Certificate in JCS	19.5	10.8	19.1	5.3	3.7
MAJS	19.0	2.7	20.9	10.5	7.4
Grades	7.2	15.8	4.7	10.5	10.7
School Granting Degree	2.3	13.2	7.0	10.5	10.7

N-171 Missing Cases: 2

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**Table 4**  
**Valuable Backgrounds in Hiring by Agency Setting\***

Rank	JF (N=38)	JFS (N=36)	JCC (N=29)	CR (N=10)	OTHER (N=18)	TOTAL N=131 Freq. %
1. NSW + Experience	24 26.1	34 37.0	27 29.3	4 4.3	3 3.3	92 100.0
2. MSW + Grad Work in JCS	26 31.0	24 28.6	19 22.6	4 3.6	12 14.3	85 100.0
3. MSW + MAJCS	29 35.0	20 25.0	19 23.8	4 5.0	9 11.3	81 100.0
4. MSW	10 17.5	28 49.1	15 26.3	0 0.0	4 7.0	57 100.0
5. MSW + MBA	10 30.3	4 12.1	13 39.4	4 12.1	2 6.1	33 100.0
6. MAJCS	8 40.0	1 5.0	4 15.0	2 10.0	6 30.0	21 100.0
7. BSW + Experience	1 5.0	8 40.0	10 50.0	1 10.0	0 30.0	20 100.0
8. MSW + Another Degree	2 10.5	8 42.1	4 21.1	1 5.3	4 21.1	19 100.0
9. MAJCS + Another Degree	9 44.4	0 0.0	0 0.0	4 22.2	5 33.3	18 100.0
10. Rabbinic Degree	2 11.8	0 0.0	0 0.0	4 23.5	12 64.7	18 100.0
11. MSW + MPA	5 31.3	5 31.3	0 0.0	3 18.8	3 18.8	16 100.0
12. MAJCS & MBA	8 57.2	0 0.0	1 7.1	4 28.6	1 7.1	14 100.0
13. MAJC + MPA	6 42.9	0 0.0	1 7.1	4 28.6	3 21.4	14 100.0
14. Law Degree	0 0.0	0 0.0	0 0.0	7 53.8	6 46.2	13 100.0
15. BSW	2 22.2	6 66.7	0 0.0	0 0.0	1 11.1	9 100.0
16. MPA	1 14.3	1 14.3	0 0.0	2 28.6	3 42.9	7 100.0
17. MBA	3 50.0	1 16.7	0 0.0	1 16.7	1 16.7	6 100.0

\* The percentages reflect the agency and setting proportion of all executives weighting each degree option as among the four most valuable.

**Table 5**  
**Importance of Graduate Education in Jewish Communal Service By Agency**

	JF	JFS	JCC	CR	Other
Extremely Important	29.3	9.4	21.4	6.3	20.0
Very Important	43.9	12.5	35.7	18.8	40.0
Somewhat Important	14.5	53.1	31.0	56.3	24.0
Not Very Important	4.9	21.9	11.9	18.8	0.0
Not At all Important	2.4	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N=156	N=41	N=32	N=42	N=16	N=25

Missing Observations 17  
X<sup>2</sup> = 42.26191 Significance 0.0004

**Table 6**  
**Preparation of Jewish Communal Service Graduates Versus Social Work By Agency Setting**

	JF	JFS	JCC	CR	Other
Jewish communal service graduates better prepared than social work	60.0	25.0	33.3	83.3	47.4
Jewish communal service and social work graduates equally prepared	31.4	41.7	43.3	16.7	42.1
Social work graduates better prepared than Jewish communal service	8.6	33.3	23.0	0.0	10.5
Total	100.0%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N=120	N=35	N=24	N=30	N=12	N=19

Missing Observations 53  
 $X^2 = 19.20718$  Significance .0138

### Twenty-Five Years Ago in this Journal

While one may well quarrel with specifics, particularly in the abbreviated form in which they have been presented, it would seem that our major thesis cannot be contested, namely, that the supposedly unitary traditional democratic Jewish value system consists of conflicting democratic and antidemocratic sets of values and that these in turn contain contradictory components of differing degrees of democracy or antidemocracy.

Now as if this were not complicated enough, before we can examine how these different sets of values apply to social service, we must take cognizance of the fact that the values of professional social service, which must serve as criteria for judging them, are themselves problematical. Like Jewish values, not only the application but the very definition of social work values is today being questioned.

Despite the prevalent theory that it is uniformly democratic, like all value systems the value system of social work consists of democratic and antidemocratic sets of norms, the former being the dominant and recognized values of the profession. Again, like all others, its democratic values include more and less consistently democratic norms. The accepted basic values of the profession are

the worth (or dignity) of the individual and the self-determination of the individual. I suggest that, contrary to their veritable scriptural authority, these overly individualistic concepts are the less democratic values of social work. I further suggest that the most consistently democratic formulation of the values of social work, reflecting the most prevalent practical valuations of social workers are: the worth of human life; the worth of persons, groups, and communities; and the worth of their fulfillment. The fulfillment of human needs through human effort and the equal right to fulfillment of all persons, groups, and communities appear to be the major principles through which the democratic values of social work manifest themselves. Social work practice, education, and research might be considered the major ways in which these principles are put into practice.

Although the profession of social work does not recognize it, its value system includes a set of norms antithetical to those it predominately holds. The cardinal antidemocratic norm of social work, as of all American life, is the worth of the economically successful individual.

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Fall, 1960