

Teaching Undergraduates About Jewish Communal Agencies: The Case for Experience-Based Learning

SUE KLARREICH, PH.D.

Director of Program Development, Jewish Vocational Service, Cleveland, Ohio*

SEVERAL years ago, the Jewish Vocational Service of Cleveland, Ohio became increasingly aware of the need for career-related counseling services for Jewish students on local campuses. It was apparent that many students were confused and concerned about career objectives since JVS was receiving a growing number of requests for information and guidance — requests which were not being adequately met by official college counseling services. Cleveland Jewish Vocational Service, therefore, appointed a Coordinator of College Services to work directly on campus.

As the Coordinator counseled students about their various concerns, certain themes emerged recurrently. One such theme, predominant among many students, was a strong interest in social welfare and a sincere desire to make their lives meaningful to their fellow man. Yet many of these students were not sure if the traditional route of social work — or more specifically, Jewish communal service — was the appropriate career path for them. As undergraduates, however, they could find very few avenues open to test out their feelings about work in this field, other than the usual volunteer jobs.

Three programs were subsequently developed to offer a career-testing exposure for such students: 1) An Intersession Mini-course; 2) A Sociology Practicum in Jewish Social Agencies; 3) JOIN — a Summer Internship Program. Although the three programs vary in struc-

ture, organization, and duration, there is a central component essential to all three: *on-site experience* in Jewish social agencies. Since all of these programs proved to be highly successful in providing for undergraduates a valuable career-testing experience, as well as in contributing to their fuller understanding of Jewish values and beliefs, all three programs are described. Each program offers clear-cut support for on-site experience-based learning in a Jewish communal framework.

Academic Programs

(Note: The JVS College Coordinator was based in the B'nai B'rith Hillel Building on the Case Western Reserve campus. Although service was provided to other campuses, cooperation with official channels of Case Western Reserve was facilitated because of this base and the academic programs were integrated into the curriculum of this university.)

Intersession Mini-Course

Case Western Reserve University operates under the 4-1-4 or Intersession Plan which permits undergraduates the option, during the month of January, to engage in special projects, independent study, innovative mini-courses, and other activities which meet the approval of a faculty committee.

The JVS Coordinator, with the cooperation of the School of Applied Social Sciences of Case Western Reserve University, implemented a Jewish com-

munal agency work experience for a limited number of undergraduates during Intersession. Undergraduates were placed at Jewish Family Service Association, Bureau of Jewish Education, Agnon Day School, and Jewish Vocational Service. Placement consisted of observation and work assignments consistent with the student's background and training. Students kept a log of their experiences and the total group met with the JVS Coordinator several times during the month to exchange reactions and impressions. For these students this was just the type of "experiential learning" they had been seeking. The month of work in a Jewish agency afforded a meaningful career exploration interlude. The agencies, realizing that they had made a worthwhile contribution to undergraduate development, also reacted very favorably.

Because the Intersession Program was so unquestionably successful, the JVS College Coordinator felt it was important to build on this mini-course experience. Together with several enthusiastic Intersession participants, the JVS Coordinator drafted a regular course proposal which was submitted to the Sociology Department. The support of an enlightened and understanding Sociology professor¹ encouraged subsequent acceptance of this proposal. The JVS Coordinator was then able to collaborate with the professor in devising an appropriate course format which was formally instituted as Sociology 375, earning 3 hours of academic credit, per semester. This course was organized as follows:

Sociology 375 — Practicum in Jewish Social Service Agencies

Prerequisite — one previous Sociology course or permission of instructor

¹ Ruth Neuer Puckett, Ph. D., Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology.

Course Organization — students spent one morning or afternoon (approximately 3 hours) per week at an agency. After four consecutive weeks at a particular agency, each student rotated to another agency.

Participating Agencies—

Jewish Community Center
Jewish Family Service Association
Jewish Vocational Service
Montefiore
Jewish Children's Bureau
Bellefaire Treatment Center for Emotionally Disturbed Children
Jewish Day Nursery
Jewish School for Retarded

Seminars — Bi-weekly two-hour seminars, conducted jointly by the Sociology professor and the JVS Coordinator, covered the following topics:

- I. Sociological analysis of social service as an institution in bureaucratic societies.
 - a. Specialization of social functions in industrial societies and proliferation of specialized organizations.
 - b. Pre-industrial methods of fulfilling needs now served by agencies.
 - c. Social service needs resulting from urbanization.
 - d. Examination of societies by degree of industrialization and differentiation of social agencies.
 - e. Public vs. private agencies in various countries of the Western world.
 - f. Relationship of social service philosophies to dominant value systems of various societies.
- II. Jewish Social Service Agencies
 - a. Community responsibility as an inherent feature of the Jewish faith.
 - b. Role of social service in the

* Formerly Coordinator of College Services.

history of the Diaspora.

- c. Ethnic social service groups among immigrants in the U.S.
- d. The special case of Jewish agencies as non-sectarian service groups.

Assignments — Reading appropriate to a seminar discussion was assigned in advance. At the end of the semester each student turned in a written report of his/her agency experiences, summarizing, evaluating, and interpreting the total practicum experience.

Evaluation — Students were evaluated on their ability to integrate agency field exposures with reading and seminar discussion.

* * * *

This Practicum proved to be an excellent learning experience for the participating students. Both the Sociology professor and the JVS Coordinator felt that it was extremely beneficial in pointing up the current structure and function, as well as the historical antecedents of Jewish communal agencies. The Practicum exposure also reinforced and developed Jewish identity and commitment. All the students who participated are currently involved in Jewish affairs, academically or vocationally, and intend to pursue such activities in the future.

It is significant to note that a similar course, involving non-sectarian as well as Jewish agencies, was subsequently instituted in the Sociology Department. Currently, Case Western Reserve University has embarked on a full-scale undergraduate program in social work.

JOIN (Jewish Occupational Interns) — An Eight-week Summer Internship

The development of the summer internship program, Project JOIN, as it

has come to be known, was developed by the JVS College Coordinator to provide an in-depth career-testing experience for undergraduates during the summer. The program is organized as follows:

Eligibility and Application

JOIN is open to Jewish Cleveland residents enrolled in a four-year degree program. Application is made to JVS and preliminary screening interviews are conducted by JVS. A pool of appropriate applicants is then referred to each participating Jewish agency for interviews and final selection.

Participating Agencies:

Bellefaire
B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation
B'nai B'rith Youth Organization
Jewish Children's Bureau
Jewish Community Center
Jewish Community Federation
Jewish Family Service Association
Jewish Vocational Service
Menorah Park
Montefiore Home
Mount Sinai Hospital

Operation

Each agency arranges a supervised work program for the intern, appropriate to that agency's particular needs and setting. The program runs for eight weeks. During the eight weeks there are seminars, discussions, and field visits to various agencies directed at developing an understanding of the total social work process and providing insight into the varied aspects of Jewish communal service. A salary of \$500 is provided to the intern for the eight weeks. One-half of an intern's salary (\$250) is provided by the agency where the intern is placed; the other half is funded by the Jewish Community Federation through JVS.

Project JOIN completed its "pilot" status in 1973 and a thorough three-year assessment of the project was conducted. JOIN had a total of 46 alumni over this three-year period and a comprehensive questionnaire was sent to 42 of these alumni (four past participants had moved from Cleveland and could not be located). Thirty-two questionnaires were returned, representing a 75% response. Data from returned questionnaires show the very positive implication that this program has had for the students who participated.

Eighty-four percent of the respondents felt that Project JOIN contributed *significantly* to their understanding of the field of social work. Seventy-five percent rated JOIN *more worthwhile* as a learning experience in comparison with other undergraduate activities (courses, readings, lectures, etc.). Fifty-nine percent felt that JOIN contributed *significantly* to their understanding of Jewish communal service. Sixty-nine percent also felt that Project JOIN contributed to their understanding of Jewish values and beliefs in some way, either *moderately* or *significantly*. Of the 27 students anticipating a social service career, more than 50% (14) responded that participation in Project JOIN determined their career direction *significantly*. Even the comments of the remaining 13, who responded that participation in Project Join determined their career direction *moderately*, suggests that the program had definite value in reinforcing their social service direction.

During these years the JOIN idea has come to the attention of other Jewish communities and many other cities have developed similar programs.² Cleveland completed its fourth year of operating

² Bert J. Goldberg, "Introducing College Students to Careers in Jewish Communal Services," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. L, No. 3 (Spring, 1974), p. 228.

Project JOIN in 1974 and JOIN is now an established program service of Cleveland JVS.

These three *on-site experienced-based* learning programs were developed in Cleveland because of many factors. Certain conditions obviously encouraged their development:

The participating Jewish communal agencies were cooperative and responsive.

The participating university was receptive to collaboration.

The students were eager and enthusiastic.

The Jewish community was supportive and, in the case of JOIN, provided seed money through the Endowment Fund of the Cleveland Jewish Community Federation.

Such conditions may not always exist simultaneously or to the same degree in other communities. But the Intersession Mini-course, the Practicum in Jewish Social Service Agencies and Project JOIN have definitely proved their value in one community in helping Jewish college students to understand the career implications of Jewish communal service and to develop a positive Jewish identification. Their success in Cleveland can serve as a positive statement for other communities. Perhaps there is no clearer way to state the case for such on-site experiences than to quote the students who participated. The following comments are taken directly from the student evaluations of these programs:

This program really solidified my intentions of going into Jewish agency work. The exposure to all these agencies was extremely important. I'm thinking more along lines of going for an MSW in this area, particularly with Jewish agencies since I've seen how many different aspects there are in Jewish social service.

B.K. CWRU Junior
Intersession Mini-course

The practicum in Jewish communal service was well worth the time involved in the field work and seminars. The field work experience was extremely valuable. One cannot really get a feel for the field of social work without actually seeing it and becoming involved in an agency. Seminars gave us the opportunity to explore the sociological, historical, and philosophical roots of Jewish communal service. We were able to apply many of our religious foundations to our present social service system. We were dealing with our heritage and this made the material in class all the more meaningful.

M.B. CWRU Senior
Practicum in Jewish Social Agencies

I have always had a distaste for Jewish institutions. I saw them as complex organizations who specialized in fund raising, self-praise, bureaucracy and nepotism. My attitude has changed — actual experience is probably the greatest education — and changed positively. Jewish communal service can be a worthwhile and relevant vocation as well as avocation. I can chalk this experience up close to my 8 weeks in Israel as one of the most significant and worthwhile experiences of my life so far.

M.N. Sophomore at University of
Michigan
JOIN Intern