

# CAREERS THAT COUNT

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*"Careers that Count" is a recruitment program designed for college students that introduces them to the career possibilities within Jewish communal service. This article describes its structure, which emphasizes interaction and includes role playing. Nearly one-third of the applicants for the University of Michigan graduate program in Jewish communal service attended this careers program.*

## EDUCATION AND RECRUITMENT

Since childhood I have had an interest in puzzles, particularly crossword puzzles and others that require cerebral ingenuity and knowledge of trivial information. I have unlimited patience for such puzzles, even if they take me several days to complete. The only puzzles I dislike are jigsaw puzzles where the majority of pieces are the same color. My husband, however, is an ace at those puzzles, and I admire him for his patience in what appears to me an impossible chore. Somehow, he finds the fun in figuring out what I believe is not even worth trying. How does my husband have the interest or find the stamina to tackle such a vexing task? He asks the same of me about the puzzles that I find challenging. Two people approach a similar situation from distinct perspectives, yet each finds a strategy to its solution.

In my professional life, as director of the University of Michigan's Sol Drachler Program in Jewish Communal Leadership, I tackle a particularly challenging puzzle on a daily basis: how to educate college students and young adults about careers in the Jewish community. Further, once this demographic slice of our community knows about Jewish communal service as a career option, what does it take to get them interested in pursuing it? Fortunately for me, this puzzle requires the analytical skill and dogged determination

that I find so intriguing. Were I to have the silver-bullet answer, however, I could immediately retire on the money I would make bottling and selling it. But I know better; a quick fix, pat solution is no solution at all. This is an issue that deserves tremendous attention, on a grand scale, and I hope the Jewish community will embrace it with vigor. As an individual trying to address the issue, I developed a strategy that is proving to be quite fruitful. This article explains the strategy and its evolution, as well as its early impact on one school of Jewish communal service.

## CAREERS THAT COUNT

In February 2002, I had the privilege of serving as a speaker at Indiana University's (IU) Jewish Studies "Career Night." The Borns Jewish Studies Program, Jewish Studies Student Association, and the Helene G. Simon Hillel at IU sponsor this program annually. At least 50 undergraduates attended "Career Night"—perhaps because of the free meal offered to them at Hillel, but I suspect also because of curiosity and sincere interest. The students, ranging from freshman to seniors, were delightful. After we dined together, I was fortunate to stand in front of two eight-foot-long tables full of information from various schools of Jewish communal service, rabbinical schools, study programs in Israel, and information about several national programs. I could not have asked for a better backdrop than tables brimming with opportunities for these young adults. To see the variety of programs and

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*Ed. Note:* Although changes in the program have transpired since the preparation of this article, the information contained therein remains correct and accurate.

places to study was eye opening for many. More than once I heard this comment: "I didn't know there was a program like this!" Indiana University did an excellent job of providing a breadth and depth of materials about Jewish careers. Few students left the event empty-handed.

This "Career Night" program left me feeling so energized that I used it as a recruitment tool at several other universities and then adapted it for the University of Michigan in 2003. Formally established as "Careers that Count," the Michigan program involves a partnership among the University's Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, Hillel, and the Drachler Program. These partners attract students with a wide range of backgrounds and career interests. The country-wide traveling group known as "The National Recruitment Team" joined the event in December 2002 and served as real-life professional role models representing Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, the JCC Association, JESNA, and UJC. "Careers that Count" sparks inquisitive conversation and kindles interest in the field of Jewish communal service.

### **Structure of the Program**

#### **Part I: Introductions**

I share dinner with tables of students and learn a little bit about many of them, but there always remains a room filled with people whom I have not yet met. Therefore, after my introduction, I begin to circulate around the room and ask each student to introduce him- or herself to me and to let me know what prompted his or her attendance that evening. Inasmuch as the program is designed to be interactive, being able to use students' names is a tremendous help.

#### **Part II: Critical Issues**

I stand before a group of bright students at the University of Michigan, one of the elite universities in the country, and I ask them to answer this question: "What are the top five issues currently confronting the North Amer-

ican Jewish community?" I record all the answers on a flip chart and then post them around the room. Finally, though tentatively, someone suggests the problem of "apathy." This is an ironic answer because from that moment on, students at Michigan begin shouting out answers faster than I can record them. A sampling of the issues they identify include anti-Semitism; intermarriage; relationship with Israel; inclusion of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered Jews in the community; Jewish education; the high cost of participation in the Jewish community; and other Diaspora communities, e.g., Argentina, the Former Soviet Union, and the like.

#### **Part III: Definition of a Jewish Communal Professional**

Who then, I ask, addresses these issues? As predicted, the first two answers are typically "rabbis" and "religious school principals." With small amounts of encouragement from me, the students conclude that a variety of professionals and lay leaders must address such issues. The students know that Jewish communal professionals include rabbis and religious school principals, but whom else? Again, the students rise to the occasion with such responses as Jewish educators, both formal and informal, and professionals who work in JCCs, federations, homes for the aged, Jewish media, synagogues, day schools, Jewish Family Services, and Jewish camps.

#### **Part IV: How to Become a Jewish Communal Professional**

Once students have a broader understanding of who are Jewish communal professionals, they express interest in learning how to become one. This part takes some educating about graduate-level study programs in Jewish communal service. In students' minds, a multitude of take-home materials can morph from irrelevant brochures to important graduate school information. During "Careers that Count," I speak to the students about schools of Jewish communal service: how they are similar to one another and how they

differ and how graduates of such programs contribute to the Jewish communities in North America and abroad.

#### Part V: Funding Opportunities

As the "Careers that Count" session proceeds, invariably at least one student asks, "Why?" Why spend more time and money in a graduate program only to end up with a degree that offers notoriously low-paying jobs? Moreover, for many students, after four years or more as undergraduates they wonder how they would ever afford to pay upward of \$60,000 for a two-year program. Again, promotional materials can prove invaluable: at Michigan I describe a variety of potential funding sources to offset the cost of graduate study. For most in attendance, students for the first time hear names like FEREP scholar, JCCA scholar, JCSC fellow, and Wexner fellow. It is true that the majority of students in seminaries and graduate programs do not receive prestigious awards and substantial funding. How to subsidize more students' tuition costs and how to increase early professional earnings are subjects worthy of discussion in a separate article.

#### Part VI: Role Play

"Careers that Count" at Michigan transforms an ordinary room into a place where undergraduate students become excited about professional opportunities in the Jewish community. It is at this juncture that I introduce a case study—a puzzle if you will—to illustrate a hypothetical day in the life of a Jewish communal professional. The details of the case study are as follows: A top donor to the Federation's annual campaign hosts an annual fundraising dinner at the donor's home. Only those who contribute \$10,000 or more to the Federation campaign are invited to the dinner. Before the fundraising portion of the evening, the wait staff serves appetizers that mistakenly include shrimp cocktails. The donor does not keep a kosher home, but would not have approved serving shellfish at a Federation event. Another major donor sees the shrimp cocktails being

served and alerts the Federation staff member who planned and is staffing the event.

With these facts laid out, I call upon three students to engage in a role-playing activity. One student plays the donor/host, the second student plays the donor who sees the shrimp cocktails being served, and the third student plays the Federation staff member. All three are asked to act out several scenarios of what could happen after the shrimp cocktails are served. Once the scenarios are played out, I ask the students whether any role-play seemed to offer the best solution (i.e., to discontinue the service of shrimp cocktails), and why. Why did other scenarios produce less desirable results? What were their differences? What is the role of the major donor to the host? What is the role of the Federation staff person to both donors?

As one might imagine, the role-plays are as varied as the students who participate in them. The one constant is the curiosity aroused about what to do with the unwanted shrimp and thereby the interest in navigating relationships between professionals and lay leaders.

#### IMPACT AND CONCLUSION

The excitement in the room during a "Careers that Count" evening is rewarding beyond description. Only the increase in the number of applicants to the Drachler Program can surpass the excitement felt in the event's aftermath. Nearly one-third of all applicants for the Drachler Class of 2005 attended "Careers that Count" at Michigan or at another university. The caliber of these applicants is quite high. Overall the candidates have superior academic records and a high rate of involvement in things Jewish on campus; many have a long history of involvement in the Jewish community, whereas others have experienced a more recent, transformative event that prompted greater affiliation within the community. These prospective students, coupled with somewhat older, more seasoned candidates, form exactly the type of cohort we aspire to have at Michigan. Recruiting them is the easy part; getting them to stay in the field is the challenging puzzle for those of us already in it.