

Re-Imagining Jewish Leadership Education

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Wexner Graduate Fellowship/Davidson Scholars Program

Challenge:

To what extent should leadership programs be designed by program participants?

Background:

Each year, the Wexner Graduate Fellowship/Davidson Scholars (WGF) Program accepts 20 exceptional candidates with a strong personal commitment to the Jewish community, a record of demonstrated excellence in academic achievement, and the potential to assume significant professional leadership roles in the North American Jewish community. Fellows are enrolled in graduate programs (in their 1st or 2nd year) geared towards preparation for careers in the following professional areas: Cantorate, Jewish Education, Jewish Professional Leadership, Jewish Studies, and the Rabbinate.

A hallmark of the WGF Program is its four-year leadership training program, which includes the following:

- Orientation (first year)
- Leadership learning calls (monthly during first year, virtual)
- Summer Institute (annual): five-day program
- Winter Institute (annual): four-day program
- Mid-Fellowship Retreat (third year): five-day program, including participation in JFNA General Assembly
- Capstone Program (fourth year): two-day program

The annual Summer Institute is primarily planned, soup to nuts, by a volunteer Planning Committee of fellows, with staff support. The Planning Committee develops a theme/focus for the Institute; identifies key goals; conceptualizes sessions/programs; creates the schedule; researches, invites, and prepares faculty members; invites the entire fellowship to propose and lead fellow-led sessions; and tracks logistical needs and considerations. During the Institute itself, the Planning Committee "runs the show," with staff providing support as needed.

While WGF Program staff handle contracting with hotels, flights for all fellows and faculty, catering, logistics (including room set-ups, A/V needs, ordering supplies, etc.), *the Planning Committee holds primary responsibility for the educational content and delivery methods of the Summer Institute.*

Considerations - the "plus":

The WGF Program engages a volunteer fellow Planning Committee based on the belief that learning happens through, and by, doing - and that the Summer Institute provides an incredible opportunity to serve on a committee of peers and engage in a group decision-making process, plan a mid-sized event (approximately 100 people), develop an educational and programmatic arc, select faculty members, practice elements of project management, integrate programmatic and logistical considerations, oversee multiple moving parts on-site, practice public speaking throughout the Institute, and evaluate their committee process along with the Institute itself upon its conclusion. Furthermore, fellows who serve on the Planning Committee have the opportunity to explore group dynamics within the committee, develop relationships with faculty members, deepen their relationships with WGF Program staff, practice giving and receiving feedback, learn about their preferred work styles and roles within a group, reflect on their professional strengths and areas for growth, and own the great responsibility and gratification of developing, planning, and running a multi-faceted, multi-day program for their peers. Many Planning Committee members report that serving on the committee was one of the greatest learning opportunities and highlight of their participation in the WGF Program.

Considerations - the "minus":

The Planning Committee is formed in the Fall, giving the Planning Committee about 9 months to develop and plan the Institute. The planning schedule for the Planning Committee and the WGF Director typically comprises weekly 1-hour phone calls and two in-person day-long meetings, with lots of emails and shared documents to review and respond to, especially in the final lead-up to the Summer Institute. *Bottom line: staffing the Planning Committee takes A LOT of time.*

Much of the planning time is content-rich and well-spent in discussions related to the Institute theme, explorations of different educational modalities, etc. but a great deal of time also goes to scheduling (and rescheduling), committee-wide deliberations (vs. solo staff decision), planning meeting agendas, taking meeting notes, reminding committee members of action items, etc. *Planning by committee preferences hands-on leadership opportunities for the Planning Committee (3-5 fellows) over efficiency.*

While the active participation of the WGF Director allows for some checks and balances throughout the planning process, there are surely compromises in programmatic quality as a result of handing over primary responsibilities to the Planning Committee. Fellows are eager to take risks, to create an Institute even better than the one the year before (often interpreted as doing something more off-the-beaten track), and to impress their peers. They are not always aware of "best practices" regarding program design and scheduling, and may be over-ambitious or unrealistic in their planning. This can create challenges not only at the Institute itself, but in the planning stages, as Planning Committee members may take on more

than they have the time or band-width for, given their already full plates as graduate students. *Planning by fellow-led committee may come with losses - and gains! - to programmatic and educational quality.*

Considerations - the "delta":

In addressing the challenge, "to what extent should leadership programs be designed by program participants?" the WGF Program staff holds the following considerations in delicate balance:

- *The Planning Committee holds primary responsibility for the educational content and delivery methods of the Summer Institute.*
- *Staffing the Planning Committee takes A LOT of time.*
- *Planning by committee preferences hands-on leadership opportunities for the Planning Committee (3-5 fellows) over efficiency.*
- *Planning by fellow-led committee may come with losses - and gains! - to programmatic and educational quality.*

As the WGF Program staff considers the gains and losses, pros and cons, of its planning approach for the annual Summer Institute, we have identified several possible experiments and points of incremental change, including:

- Maintain current approach, but limit the pieces of the Institute determined by the Planning Committee (making some programs staff-determined, planned, and run)
- Limit the Planning Committee to a maximum of 4 fellows, to facilitate scheduling
- WGF Program staff to take on pre-work, i.e. identify a short list of faculty for Planning Committee to choose from
- Adjust Planning Committee meeting schedule, i.e. from weekly to bi-weekly meetings
- Shorten the planning timeline, i.e. from 9 months to 4-6 months

We are also open to learning entirely different approaches, and welcome suggestions. We may, of course, ultimately determine that our current model makes the most sense for the WGF Program, given "best practices" in experiential learning and leadership training, and that the challenge posed is part of the magic.