



Long-term Relationships: The Case for Alumni Engagement

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by Rebecca Voorwinde

“How has a Jewish organization of which you are an alumnus conveyed that you’re important to them?”

Recently, I asked this relatively simple question to a group of young Jewish educators. These were individuals who had participated in multiple Jewish programs over the course of their lives – including Jewish day schools, camps and fellowships – who a Jewish organization would regard as successful alumni. The responses I received were mostly cynical, referring to donation requests, lackluster newsletters, Facebook groups launched but not followed through and inconsistent contact from staff or lay leaders. With so many Jewish organizations seeking to engage alumni today, why are there so many alumni who still find this engagement inauthentic?

The key to successful alumni engagement is approaching the work in terms of a long-term relationship. In my experience cultivating an alumni community of nearly 1000 talented young Jews across North America and Israel as co-Director of [The Bronfman Youth Fellowships](#), I’ve found that alumni are most committed when they know that they are valued by an organization for who they are, not just what they can donate or if an organization can ‘brag’ about them. When designing an alumni engagement strategy, start by identifying what your organization seeks from alumni and what they seek from you. Like any good relationship, the mutual benefit is what will lead to increased investment and affinity as the years progress.

As an organizational professional about to embark on a plan of alumni engagement, it is important to think about what you actually hope the benefit for your organization will be. I have outlined here four key benefits of alumni engagement that every organization should consider. Not all will resonate for your organization, but at least some should be present when considering a strategy.

1. **Inspire current participants:** Your organization is grounded in a set of values, and it can be very inspiring for current students to see alumni live out the values as they grow up. As our alumni community has matured, we now see alumni of the Bronfman

Fellowships as the exact individuals who can best speak about contemporary Jewish life or social justice issues. Inspiring current students could take the form of alumni panels, mentorship programs, or even having alumni serve as program personnel. To date, five of our alumni have worked for the program as rabbinic educators and others have joined our professional team or alumni board. Identifying the talents of alumni and asking them to share them not only is inspirational to students – it also makes alumni feel like their involvement is worthwhile, and it enhances your educational curriculum (win, win, win!).

2. **Word of mouth promotion:** Alumni may have started at your program as tuition-paying consumers, but once they graduate, they have the potential to serve as powerful ambassadors in the wider world. Each year, alumni and their parents help the Bronfman Fellowships spread the word about our recruitment – calling contacts and emailing people with a simple template that we created. In this way, they help us increase the pool of talent and they get the opportunity to share something that they care about. When alumni are asked to help and provided ways to contribute that are not time consuming, engagement and support increases.
3. **Feedback and skill-based volunteerism:** Since alumni know your program from the inside, they can offer targeted feedback and guidance to help your program grow and improve. This is also why alumni make excellent volunteers: they can combine their expertise in your organization's culture with their own professional skills. For example, at the Bronfman Fellowships tech-savvy alumni volunteers have provided excellent user feedback and technical tweaks as we develop a new website.
4. **Measure success:** Tracking students as they grow can help you develop useful data and metrics for improving your school or program and for proving your successes to prospective participants and funders. Don't wait until you want to conduct an alumni survey to get in touch. Keep track of contact information and other pertinent data in a database. This information will increase your ability to activate your network of alumni for measurement purposes and for connecting individuals to one another.

Though it helps to have dedicated professional staff or programming for alumni, this is not the only way to succeed at an engagement strategy. Consider working through existing natural channels – friendship circles, involved lay leaders and, in particular, staff who some alumni view as mentors.

This Tuesday August 14th at 1pm EST, I am pleased to be part of the [Jewish Day School Video Academy: Alumni Edition](#) as a facilitator of a webinar about alumni engagement strategies and techniques for Jewish day schools. Alumni represent the fruits of your labor – the more they can access opportunities through your networks, the further the impact of your educational institution – leading to change in the Jewish world and, on a more practical level, reputational benefits for your program.

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