



The Expert Within: Engaging Alumni in a Selection Process

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BYFI Community

by Dr. Shira Fishman

The primary selection criterion for the Bronfman Fellowships (BYFI) is to identify “promising” Jewish leaders. How do you see, measure and judge “promise” of Jewish leadership amongst such a diverse pool of applicants, especially when candidates are still in high school? As a seasoned application reader who served on the admissions committee at Barnard College, I initially approached the task of reading applications for the Bronfman Fellowships with the same criteria I used to evaluate college applicants. I quickly was surprised to find that reading applications through this lens was impractical. As an alumna of the program, I was much more forgiving of applicants, wanting to give them the benefit of the doubt, rather than trying to harshly critique their application. In addition, the term “promise” was vague and unlike the criteria used in college admissions, thus requiring a different sensitivity when reading applications.

Though involving alumni in an application review process may be a challenging idea to some professionals concerned about quality control or expertise, I highly recommend it to other networks who want to engage alumni in a meaningful leadership experience. The Bronfman Fellowships started using alumni to review applications as alumni matured professionally. Starting in 2010, twenty-three years into the Fellowship, all first-round reviews, of a three-stage review process, were conducted by alumni. Alumni bring a unique and thoughtful perspective to the process.

The alumni who serve as first-round readers value their own experience on the Bronfman Fellowships and therefore are likely to give other candidates a serious chance at the same experience. When tasked with assessing “promising” leaders, we are humbled by the experience. Rather than acting as entitled gatekeepers to future fellows, alumni readers demonstrate the opposite attitude, oftentimes being overly generous to applicants who likely will not advance in the process. For many alumni readers there even is a slight discomfort with reading applications, feeling that the applicants are so impressive that we are not qualified to judge them.

Yet, alumni readers also are guided to think rigorously about each application. As an admissions counselor I worked with specific standards, evaluating the rigor of course selection, strength of extracurricular activities and the quality of the essays. These provide a fairly well defined benchmark from which to judge each applicant. But as a reader for the Bronfman Fellowships I was told not to worry about balancing qualities such as gender, Jewish upbringing, Jewish education or geographic location. Each applicant is assessed on his or her own merit. The criteria I was asked to consider included intellectual curiosity, potential for leadership (irrespective of domain) and desire to engage in open discussion with peers. Gleaning these qualities from the multitude of interesting and impressive applications is no easy task. As an alumni reader, I delve into each essay and letter of recommendation. In their essays, applicants must critically evaluate a given situation and their role in it, revealing some insight or understanding about themselves in the process. Often applicants describe a challenge that they faced and resolved. Rarely in life are such challenges easily solved and I look for signs that the individual showed real struggle and perhaps even did not resolve the issue. These examples demonstrate that an applicant has the maturity and motivation necessary to spend a Fellowship year challenging their own beliefs. As alumni, we know best how “tough” it can be to confront one’s identity in a cohort of peers and we know what qualities a candidate must possess to truly maximize their experience.

In my current professional work at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, I evaluate various outcome measures of Taglit-Birthright Trips to Israel using rigorous quantitative methods. Through this research I explore the value of a Jewish communal peer trip to Israel, how the Taglit experience helps shape the Jewish identity of participants, making them more engaged with Israel and with the worldwide Jewish community. Yet, I did not need research to demonstrate the benefits of a peer educational trip to Israel, a trip with a diverse group of individuals willing to challenge and change their views. I was lucky enough to spend a summer on BYFI and I know that my Jewish identity was forever changed by that experience.

Using alumni to assist with the selection process enriches the experience for all. Alumni enjoy the opportunity to listen to the voices of future fellows as they present themselves in their applications. In addition, alumni feel a deeper appreciation for the opportunity that their own selection afforded them. Reading applications connects me to the larger fellowship community, reminding me of the talent and strength of our community. Each winter, as I open my computer to read a new batch of applications, I am reminded of just how many young adults can be thoughtful, engaging and insightful about their Judaism and I know there is a bright future for the Jewish community.

[also see *Choosing Amongst the Chosen People: The Challenge of Selection* by Rebecca Voorwinde.]

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This post is part of a special series in recognition of the 25th Anniversary of The Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel.

