

## Understanding the Israel Fellows Program: Program Theory and

**Implementation Challenges:** Concern regarding support for Israel on North American campuses led to the development of the Israel Fellows Program (IFP). The IFP, a collaboration of Hillel: the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (Hillel) and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), brings Israeli young adults to American college campuses to work on Israel education, advocacy, and engagement. The IFP was launched in 2003 on six American campuses. In the 2012-13 academic year, 56 Fellows served 70 North American colleges and universities. JAFI and Hillel are working to develop systematic data that can be used as a basis for strategizing how best to extend the reach and impact of the program. The first phase of this research, conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University, focused on the implementation of the IFP within the context of its program theory of change.

Eight single campus-based and two metrolevel Hillels were chosen as the focal point for study representing the full spectrum of campuses involved in the program. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants on each campus including Israel fellows, their supervisors, Hillel directors, and student leaders. In addition, five JAFI staff members were interviewed about recruitment, selection, training, placement, and tenure of fellows.

### Program Theory

IFP's underlying theory of change is student-centered and is comprised of two components:

1. Building relationships between young Israelis and American students
2. Disseminating the impact of these relationships through student networks.

*Authentic Person-to-Person Contact:* The core tenet of the IFP is that developing a relationship with an Israeli peer will help Jewish young adults in the Diaspora engage more closely with Israel and their Jewish identity. Fellows present Israeli culture and society through their own lives thereby providing students with a personal, authentic encounter with Israel and moving the conversation beyond history and conflict.

*Networking Impact:* Fellows identify potential student leaders and build small clusters of students to develop broader campus programming.

The IFP theory of change faces several issues. First, the theory lacks goal clarity. For JAFI, the IFP primarily represents an intervention to promote Israel education and engagement. For campus Hillel organizations it is part of the larger goal of fostering engagement with Jewish identity.

Second, the IFP theory of change relies on dissemination of impact through student networks which by definition lack the immediacy and authenticity of direct contact with an Israel fellow. Third, reliance on personal relationships and student networks may not be an effective strategy for influencing engagement with Israel on the broader campus.

### Securing the Jewish Future for Generations

### **Challenges to IFP Implementation**

Over the last decade the IFP has developed from a small improvised pilot to an established program with formal protocols for recruiting, selecting, training, and placing fellows. Nonetheless, several challenges to the successful implementation of the IFP program continue into its second decade of operation.

*Retention of Fellows:* Fellows are expected to make a two-year commitment, but most leave after their first year. Hillel organizations see the premature departure of a fellow as the loss of their investment in selecting, acculturating, and training this individual. However, the greatest cost is in the potential loss of the network of relationships formed by that fellow. Although there are isolated cases where a fellow has been homesick or unable to adapt to the particular campus, the primary causes of attrition appear to be more endemic to the program. Taking on the role of a fellow is a difficult assignment, and it carries substantial personal costs. Fellows put their professional and personal lives on hold for two years. In addition, their living stipend, particularly at schools in metropolitan areas, is inadequate.

*Selection and Placement:* One of the challenges to the successful implementation of the IFP, especially relevant to program expansion, is the selection and retention until placement of high potential candidates. The ideal candidate is young yet mature, has knowledge of Israel and Israel education, speaks English fluently, and possesses strong interpersonal skills. Not surprisingly, other programs and businesses compete for the same stellar candidates. JAFI staff also needs to develop a diverse pool of candidates to respond to the needs of particular campuses.

*Training for the Right “Toolbox”:* There are several discrepancies between the training fellows receive and the skills and knowledge they actually need to succeed on campus. Training focuses on education, program development, advocacy, and public relations. Once on campus fellows find that Hillel’s approach of working through students requires skills of networking, relationship building, and advising/supervising groups of students. Training often leads fellows to expect politically charged campus environments. The reality they find is often political apathy and a lack of public discourse about Israel. Fellows also receive extensive information on American national Jewish organizations, but learn little about the personal nature of Jewish identity among American young adults.

*Acclimatization:* Like other young adults starting a new job, fellows are often facing their first experience of moving to a new city with no social or family connections. They can feel lonely, dislocated, and overwhelmed. Fellows are also confronted with and confused by the cultural differences between American and Israeli society and between American and Israeli Jews, thereby making it more difficult to learn how to maneuver in this new cultural context.

*Being Stretched Too Thin:* Fellows are often stretched too thin. Serving multiple campuses requires time and resources sometimes above and beyond reasonable expectations. At smaller Hillel organizations, fellows’ responsibilities often extend beyond Israel

engagement. Fellows are often perplexed by the competing goals and priorities of Hillel and JAFI, and they search for ways to juggle their responsibilities to multiple supervisors.

Explication of IFP program theory and implementation challenges will enable JAFI and Hillel to move toward a stronger and richer engagement with Israel on American college campuses. This research also lays the groundwork for the development of a comprehensive evaluation of the IFP.

### **Functioning of the Israel Fellows**

In the second stage of the evaluation, Brandeis evaluated the functioning of the Israel Fellows through a survey of Executive Directors of Hillel organizations on American college campuses. They were asked questions about Israel programming and activities, the overall political atmosphere, and anti-Israel activities on campuses during the 2013-2014 academic year, the role and importance of their Israel fellow in promoting Israel engagement and in mobilizing students and other elements of the campus to address anti-Israel campaigns. The response rate was 74%; 49% came from campuses with an Israel Fellow.

The overwhelming majority of the directors indicated that their Israel Fellow was very important to Taglit-Birthright Israel recruitment, orientation, reunions and follow up as well as to showing Israeli films, celebrations of Israeli holidays, café Ivrit Hebrew sessions, tabling, and organizing lectures and panels about Israel.

When asked how their Israel programming would be affected if they did not have a Fellow, the overwhelming majority of respondents expressed strong endorsement of the value of this role and concern that without an Israel Fellow they would be severely hampered or unable to provide Israel programming. Many noted that without their Fellow they would not have the staff to devote to Israel programming.

The perceptions of Hillel executives regarding the value of Israel Fellows are also supported by comparison of Israel programming on those campuses that do and do not have a Fellow. In particular, activities related to Taglit-Birthright Israel recruitment, reunion, and follow-up, as well as extra-curricular courses or lectures on topics related to Israel are significantly more frequent on campuses where a Fellow is present.

In terms of their knowledge of and focus on Israel, Fellows represent a valuable resource to campus Hillels that cannot easily be replaced with existing staff. The centrality of Fellows for Israel programming is supported by the finding that one-quarter (24%) of campuses that do not have a Fellow indicate that they have no staff whose portfolio focuses on Israel programming. The knowledge of Israel that Fellows bring to their work is also a unique resource in most Hillels. The majority of Hillel executives, whether they did or did not have a Fellow, felt that their staff had only modest confidence in their knowledge of Israel. Less than one-third felt that their staff overall were very confident in their knowledge of Israeli politics, social issues, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, arts and culture and history. Although some noted that more senior staff were more knowledgeable, they also acknowledged that

more junior staff, those that are in most close contact with students, are often far less confident in their comprehensive knowledge of Israel.

In the current political climate, Hillel organizations are responsible not only for the positive tasks of Israel education and engagement but also with combating anti-Israel activities and campaigns on campus. The survey asked respondents to indicate the frequency of a variety of anti-Israel activities that might have taken place on their campus in the prior year. Sixty percent of campuses experienced some form of pro-Palestinian or anti-Israeli programming on campus including 6 “apartheid” walls, and Palestinian solidarity weeks. One-third (31%) of campuses reported that at least one form of BDS campaign took place on their campus including boycott, divestiture and sanctions campaigns.

The findings reported in this memo paint a very positive preliminary portrait of the contributions made by Israel Fellows to Israel programming on American college campuses. However, there are several caveats to be kept in mind in interpreting these findings and they should not be taken to represent a summative evaluation of the Israel Fellows program. The first caution is that the survey on which they are based is a retrospective look at campus activity and cannot substitute for a pre-post study of campus outcomes. It is also possible that pre-existing differences between those campuses that do and do not have a Fellow account for some portion of the observed differences. That being said, the findings of this survey do suggest that Fellows are seen as central players in all aspects of programming related to Israel, in driving the Taglit-Birthright Israel agenda and in garnering support from diverse elements of the campus in the face of anti-Israel activity.