



The Alumni Experience, Reversed

ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-alumni-experience-reversed/

eJP

As we see it, the capital we invest in our fellows (both human and financial) is too great for the experience to culminate at the end of high school.



Photo courtesy Bronfman Youth Fellowship in Israel via Emily Faber.

By Aaron Steinberg

[This is the seventh and final installment in a series that highlights the community case studies featured in the [Alumni Playbook](#), an online resource from the Schusterman Family Foundation designed to help community initiators build robust alumni networks. To learn more about the [Bronfman Fellowships](#), visit their Playbook [case study](#) and join the Bronfman team for an [exclusive webinar](#) that offers a closer look at how they maintain a lifelong alumni community on Wednesday, February 10 at 12:30 PM EST.]

At the Bronfman Fellowships, we have flipped the mindset of what it means to be a program alumnus on its head. Our immersive fellowship year serves as an initiation into our alumni community – the ultimate expression of our mission to create a vibrant and pluralistic model of Jewish community. A couple dozen teens spending afternoons studying Jewish texts in the hills of Jerusalem and waging philosophical battles at two in the morning in a Galilee youth hostel – these experiences are simply the training grounds for the main event. Since our program's founding 30 years ago, we've always taken the long view.

We instill in our fellows the value of meaningful dialogue, Jewish literacy, a strong sense of self identity and a commitment to pluralism. We challenge them to own their Jewish identity, think critically about their world and envision *b'chavruta* (in partnership) a better model to strive towards. We believe this is the beginning of a lifelong process of learning, sharing, questioning, listening and more – and our hope is that our program alumni are up for the challenge of inspiring these actions wherever they go.

As we see it, the capital we invest in our fellows (both human and financial) is too great for the experience to culminate at the end of high school. Take for comparison the experience of attending medical school where hundreds of thousands of dollars – and tens of thousands of hours – are spent preparing students to practice medicine professionally. The point isn't simply to provide a good learning experience that is contained to the handful of years in a classroom; it's about preparing students to put their skills to work once they're in the real world. The work doesn't end after the program – it's only just begun!

We all know that this is also true of immersive programs in the Jewish community: whether you run a summer trip, a yearlong fellowship, a 10-day service outing to the global south or a weekend retreat, the goal is to profoundly affect participants. We want to inspire them, educate them and connect them. We can refer to our participants as alumni, but unless we orient our perspective to care about the post-experience, we will never have the true effect we are looking for. Why does alumni engagement so often become an afterthought?

Alumni engagement is not for the faint at heart.

For many organizations, the budget is simply not there to invest heavily in alumni. Too many donors are concerned with the hard metrics of participation numbers and less swayed by the qualitative nature of alumni engagement. Most of our alumni expenses come from hiring professional staff to invest time in building relationships – and a relatively small part of the budget goes to programming and event expenses. Often, a new program needs to prove its worth for a few years to get reliable funding, and in the time it takes to get there, the precedent has already been set. The earlier alumni cohorts have learned not to expect much from the organization.

Some of the strategies laid out below will work on a tight budget, and others less so. Most of them require ample time and planning. But in addition to the resources required to execute your plans, you also need to be concerned about organizational culture and buy-in.

Reorienting your program as an entry point to your alumni community is not simple. Not every

participant wants to make such a lengthy commitment. Your staff will be further burdened with thinking strategically about post-program organizing and programming that will be required. Your fundraising priorities and efforts will need to be expanded and shifted. It is possible that you could turn people off of your program if they are uninterested in a longer commitment. You might be forced to re-envision what your program is altogether.

Proceed carefully.

So how's it done?

As an organization, we are committed to turning every relationship with a Bronfman Fellow into a lifelong connection. We have implemented practices designed to condition our fellows to expect this approach, employing strategies for outreach that strengthen our alumni community and provide opportunities to reconnect with the organization:

- **Start (Very) Early**– From the beginning, when our fellows apply for our program, we tell them about the alumni experience. They know that alumni volunteer to read applications to help select new cohorts of fellows. We integrate alumni into our fellowship program as speakers and mentors. We often invite alumni to speak to our group, or to join us for a meal. We've even organized for alumni to host groups of new fellows in their homes, as well. Perhaps most importantly, during the fellowship year each student is assigned an alumni mentor to assist with a community project. This “big sibling” pairing drives home the idea that there is a lot more to this community than a one-year experience.
- **Network Weaving** – We are continuously introducing people in an effort to tighten the web of our alumni community. One of our major goals is to form new connections between alumni of all ages, interests, lifestyles, geographies and professions – and we are able to partially achieve this by convening people at events (virtual and in person). However, most of the work is accomplished through personalized *shidduchim* (matches) made by the staff and members of our lay leadership. When we speak with alumni, we listen to what's on their mind and try to identify connections they might appreciate.
- **Engaging at Inflection Points** – As people age, move and change, their connection to the community naturally ebbs and flows. To reinforce the connection Bronfmanim have to the community, we make an effort to be there during pivotal moments in people's lives, which often means a change in career, marital status, location or education. Our alumni are already prepared to reach out to us when they move to a new city, and we will make a relevant introduction if someone is switching professional fields or considering an academic degree. Although having children is often a life stage where alumni are busy and might disengage, we are designing programs for parents in an effort to emphasize the BYFI community as a resource for pluralistic parenting support.

Our approach continues to develop as we explore new models of lay leadership within our community and strive to increase the international network weaving between our North American and Israeli alumni communities.

This strategy demands resources and planning, but transforming your spreadsheet of program graduates into an alumni community will ensure that the impact you have on them and the larger community lasts a lifetime.

Interested in learning more about alumni engagement? Check out the [Alumni Playbook](#), a hands-on toolkit designed to help community initiators learn from successful alumni programs and provide them with conceptual guidance, practical advice and tactical support as they plan, shape and implement alumni strategies.

Aaron Steinberg is the Manager of Alumni Initiatives at the [Bronfman Fellowships](#), where he works closely with a global alumni community of nearly 1,100 Jewish leaders, innovators and active members. He is a licensed social worker who has previously held positions at the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, SAR Academy and Yeshiva University. Aaron lives in White Plains with his wife Adina and young children Dahlia and Judah.