

CASE STUDIES

Take a closer look at how seven organizations have tackled diverse challenges and built vibrant alumni communities.

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The Bronfman Fellowships

Challenge

Founded in 1987 by Edgar M. Bronfman, The Bronfman Fellowships is now a flagship program for outstanding young Jews in North America and Israel that recruits future influencers at a formative point in their lives and immerses them in the study of Jewish texts, pluralism and social responsibility.

Through a highly selective process, the program recruits high school juniors to participate in transformational educational experiences in Israel and North America. After completing their fellowships, Bronfman Fellows become part of a lifelong alumni community where members inspire and support each other. In its almost 30-year history, the Bronfman Fellowships have grown into a vibrant network of over 1,000 individuals that includes some of today's most renowned Jewish writers, thinkers and leaders.

The Fellowships place great importance on identifying ways to enhance the discourse between past participants of the North American and Israeli Fellowships, which together compose the Bronfman alumni community. Over time, the organization's leadership realized that the communities consisted of a variety of age demographics, lifestyles and interest areas, and it would therefore benefit the organization to develop programming for the alumni communities separately. The remainder of this case study will focus primarily on the development of the North American alumni community; however, the Bronfman Fellowships offer additional programming to the Israeli alumni community and continue to implement joint initiatives between the two communities in strategically aligned areas.

While creating a lifelong community has been an integral aspect of the Bronfman Fellowships' mission since their founding, their approach to achieving this vision has evolved over time. As the Fellowships continued to grow, the alumni community began to encompass individuals across different life stages. In

the early 2000s, Bronfman began to consider the ways it could strengthen and expand its alumni model to adapt to this shift.

Approach

Creating a lifelong community has been part of the organization's mission and structure since its founding. From the moment new Fellows receive their acceptance letters, Bronfman emphasizes the vibrancy of the greater alumni community, referred to as the "Bronfmanim." Consistent with this long-term vision, the Fellowships have been offering informal programming for their alumni since their earliest years. The program hosted annual reunion retreats, sent out regular newsletters featuring articles by alumni and "class notes," managed an online alumni discussion listserv, and hosted occasional alumni events and gatherings. However, in 2003, the organization decided it was time to take a more strategic approach to building its alumni community.

The first step in this process was the creation of an **Alumni Advisory Board**, a diverse group of alumni who are selected to collectively serve as a "think tank" for alumni life. The Board advocates on behalf of Bronfman alumni, developing new ideas and facilitating existing processes.

One of the first major initiatives that stemmed from the Alumni Advisory Board was the creation of the **Alumni Venture Fund** in 2005, the first-of-its-kind peer-to-peer grant program for and by alumni. Based on the successful implementation of these two initiatives, the Samuel Bronfman Foundation (the Fellowships' major funder) hosted a think tank to explore next steps for the program. A mix of faculty and alumni participated in the think tank, and the primary goal that emerged was to hire a Director of Alumni Engagement responsible for spearheading a focused strategy that would enhance alumni life and the broader Jewish community.

In 2008, the Bronfman Fellowships took the next major step in strengthening their alumni community by hiring Rebecca Voorwinde to serve as its first staff member dedicated to alumni engagement. Rebecca's first official act was the assembly of a detailed strategy document that mapped out the alumni community. After conducting a major alumni survey in 2008 and transferring information to Salesforce, Rebecca analyzed the data to get a clearer portrait of their alumni network.

Over the next few years, Rebecca worked closely with the Alumni Advisory Board and members of the community to develop a plan with one goal in mind: to segment Bronfman's diverse alumni community so the organization could best address the needs and interests of its many cohorts and age groups. During this process, the team identified a few core principles that would ultimately shape the development of its alumni strategy. They recognized that to build effective and appealing "alumni life," they could not design alumni programming separately from the core Fellowship program; rather, core programming and alumni strategy had to be designed in tandem. In addition, the team determined that the organization had to change its metrics approach: rather than focusing solely on quantitative metrics (such as event

attendance), it had to expand its analysis to include qualitative, relationship-focused methods of tracking engagement. Staff have aimed to “get to know” alumni as individuals, placing the greatest value on metrics that indicate depth of connection to the organization and depth of connection between alumni. The final piece of the strategy was identifying ways to support alumni at different life stages and critical “inflection points.”

In 2011, the Bronfman Fellowships underwent a leadership transition that resulted in another significant shift in the implementation of alumni initiatives. Rebecca was named Co-Director of the program, along with Rabbi Mishael Zion, and they decided to increase the staff dedicated to alumni to turn their strategy into a reality. The new increase in staff enabled them to strengthen their alumni community based on the aforementioned principles, and they began executing this vision through the following strategies:

Intergenerational Connections:

During Initial Fellowship Year:

Ma'aseh (Action) Projects: An integral aspect of the Bronfman Fellowship experience is getting involved in a local community project during their senior year of high school. The program pairs older alumni advisors with Fellows to share expertise that relates to the specific project and to introduce Bronfman Fellows to the alumni network.

Recruiting: The organization has a multi-tiered selection process for incoming Fellows, and it decided to make alumni integral to this process. In stage one of the selection process, two alumni review each application—a great opportunity to keep alumni involved with the program and enable them to shape the future of the community. Once chosen, Fellows are informed that alumni played a key role in their selection, which makes clear from the very beginning of their experience that they are joining an exciting, ongoing community.

Alumni Speakers: Alumni of varying skill levels, from college students to established experts in various fields, are asked to speak during both Fellowship and alumni programming—showing younger alumni the diversity and power of the community and providing older alumni a meaningful way to remain involved and give back.

Continued Involvement:

Mentorship: To harness the power of the Bronfman Fellowships' talented and diverse alumni, staff facilitated strategic networking among Bronfmanim to inspire, engage and amplify the impact of the community.

Caring Initiative: In 2014, the Alumni Advisory Board created a new initiative to cultivate a culture of support for Bronfmanim and their families. Through this initiative, the Bronfman Fellowships have shifted their alumni outreach to support them through life's challenges, in addition to its triumphs.

Professional Connections: The program has become a critical resource for alumni seeking career advice and opportunities. Bronfman tracks the career progression of its alumni, makes thoughtful connections and introductions between its community members and provides guidance and resources in the opportunities section of its weekly emails and during the annual Collegiate Reunion. The team has also focused on facilitating valuable professional connections between its North American and Israeli alumni.

Programming and Events:

Immersive Programming: In 2011, the Bronfman Fellowships began experimenting with cohort-based immersive programming for alumni. Due to the organization's small staff size and desire to provide programming to alumni at different life stages, the team decided to change up their programming every year to ensure that every age group was provided opportunities for involvement. Bronfman has continually experimented with new opportunities, starting with the following:

Bronfman Campus Ambassadors: Through a grant from Repair the World, Bronfman was able to offer a year-long fellowship program for Bronfmanim leading service projects on college campuses from 2011 to 2014.

Roundtable: In 2014, the organization hosted a special seminar for collegiate alumni discussing Israel discourse on campus, in response to requests by alumni.

Alumni "Doers": In 2015, to celebrate its 10th year of the Alumni Venture Fund, the Fellowships created a daylong seminar for grantees and alumni, titled "A Day Away from Your To Do List." The seminar convened alumni from both Israel and the U.S. and focused on personal reflection, continued learning and connecting with peers.

Older Israeli Alumni Gathering: In 2015, the program will host its first overnight retreat for the alumni of the first eight Israeli cohorts. By keeping the age range of the group narrow, content can be tailored to address the topics most important to those who are just starting careers and families.

Collegiate Reunion: The Bronfman Fellowships have offered an annual gathering of college-aged alumni at a campus in the Northeastern U.S. since the program's earliest years. In 2012, the organization decided to prioritize the event and help every collegiate alumnus attend at least one Collegiate Reunion during his or her college career. The staff offered travel stipends to alumni outside of the Northeast who may not otherwise have the means to attend the event. In Israel, army and post-army alumni are invited to a yearly shabbaton (weekend retreat), mirroring the approach and vision for the collegiate reunion. A highlight of these reunions is the opportunity for alumni to sign up for "office hours" and have one-on-one conversations with staff.

Milestone Reunions: Until the late 1990s, the Bronfman Fellowships held a large annual weekend retreat for alumni of all ages. Once the program entered its 15th year, a decision was made to instead mark milestones every five years. These large-scale reunion gatherings are located in a major city and consist of smaller cohort-based activities, Shabbat meals and a big "party" for all attendees.

Regional Events: In cities with at least five alumni, the organization encourages local "living room" gatherings that include shared meals, discussions and Jewish learning. When staff members travel outside of Israel or New York, they host local events at the homes of alumni. Because geography is easier to traverse in Israel, larger-scale alumni events take place in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem to attract alumni from all over the country. Major annual Israeli events include an arts-based functions at local bars and panel discussions with policy experts.

Virtual Community: Bronfman has increased the number of virtual community opportunities in the past few years, crystallizing their effort to feature Rabbi Mishael Zion, the program's Co-Director and Director of Education, as a virtual Rabbi for the community. With Rabbi Zion at the helm, individuals who are not affiliated with another Jewish community and those seeking a pluralistic perspective can turn to him for guidance.

The Bronfman Fellowships began experimenting with "lifecycle calls" for alumni at different critical life milestones. Calls have focused on a number of topics, including upcoming weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation and parenting for young children.

The program launched "Bronftalks," a series of conference calls focused on current events that feature notable alumni and parents of alumni as keynote speakers.

After the death of the Fellowships' founder, Edgar M. Bronfman, alumni committed to reading a book or studying a text in Edgar's memory. The organization arranged virtual "chevrotahs" (group learning) and webinars with the authors of the three books selected for collective study.

Communication:

In a group of over 1,000 people, communication plays an important role in how alumni perceive and interact with the community. Beginning in 2015, the Bronfman Fellowships now have a staff member dedicated to this type of communications, who engages with alumni across the following platforms:

Social Media: The organization has a presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram, platforms that allow them to instill pride in the community, share content and foster connections.

EverTrue: The Fellowships began using an app called EverTrue to facilitate alumni connections across the community. Through EverTrue, users can search for others based on geography, profession and age.

Listserv: The program's listserv has been in place since the 1990s, but has remained an effective, organic forum for communication within their alumni network. The listserv is an ongoing, unmoderated, uncensored conversation that has remained a crucial medium for alumni to engage in important conversations.

Weekly Rotating Emails: Each week alumni receive an email compilation of jobs and opportunities, and an additional weekly digest of housing requests and alumni updates. By keeping announcement-style messaging separate, these emails keep listserv activity lively and prevent it from becoming mundane. In addition, alumni receive occasional programmatic updates, Fellowship highlights, event announcements and Alumni Venture Fund updates throughout the year.

Weekly D'var Torah Emails: Each week, Rabbi Mishael Zion shares a D'var Torah (commentary on the weekly Torah portion) with the community. In 2014, Rabbi Zion began writing monthly commentaries and allowed different alumni write their own Divrei Torah in the remaining weeks. Rabbi Zion provides editorial support and guidance for each submission.

Annual Publication: Each year, the organization releases an alumni newsletter, magazine or report that shifts in size and scope. In the past, the content has included alumni profiles, programming content overviews and community highlights.

Impact

Note: Case study reflects data through June 2014.

In 2014, 76% of program alumni interacted with the Bronfman community through the listserv, magazine, reunions, events, mentoring other alumni or supporting the Alumni Venture Fund. The staff interacted directly with 324 alumni via one-on-one catch-ups and 356 alumni at events.

Alumni Venture Fund:

Since 2005, the program's award-winning Alumni Venture Fund has supported alumni-led initiatives aligned with Bronfman values. In 2013, the organization decided to make the Alumni Venture Fund the primary vehicle for collaboration between its North American and Israeli communities, opening up the Fund to applications and donations from Israeli alumni and making the grantmaking process a co-deliberation between the two communities.

2014 was a record year for grant applications and donations: \$32,000 was raised from 150 donors and 30% of Israeli alumni contributed.

Over the last 10 years, \$245,000 has been distributed in grants, over 200 projects have been supported and over 500 Bronfmanim have donated to the fund, representing 50% of the alumni community.

Intergenerational Connections:

Recruiting: In 2014, approximately 40 alumni served as application readers.

Alumni Speakers: 8 Bronfman alumni were speakers during the 2014 Fellowship seminars.

Caring Initiative: In 2014, after the launch of the new Caring Initiative, many alumni signed up to serve as community resources on infertility, divorce, LGBT family life, career changes, interfaith marriage, chronic illness, loss and mourning and mental health challenges.

- Bronfmanim reached out to bereaved community members by offering condolences, suggesting helpful resources and attending shiva.
- In 2014, three text study events were held to discuss loss and healing.
- 46 Bronfmanim joined a new parenting listserv.

Programming and Events:

Immersive Programming:

- In 2014, 12 college-aged Bronfmanim came together to reflect on Israel discourse on campus.
- In 2015, the Bronfman Fellowships held their first seminar for Alumni Venture Fund grantees.

Collegiate Reunion: Since the program shifted its focus to boosting the attendance of alumni outside of the Northeast, participation rates have skyrocketed. In 2014, 60% of college age Bronfman alumni gathered at Princeton for the annual Collegiate Reunion, and in Israel, 70% of army/post-army alumni attended their annual reunion.

Regional Events: In 2014, Bronfmanim gathered in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Be'er Sheva, Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Virtual Community:

- Bronfman held 8 "Bronftalks," lunchtime briefing calls by Bronfman alumni on topics ranging from mass incarceration to the protests in Ferguson.
- 20 Bronfmanim joined virtual "chevrutahs" (pairings for Jewish text study) to learn together over the course of 2014.

Communication:

EverTrue: 25% of Bronfman alumni downloaded EverTrue, the alumni directory app.

Listserv: The Listserv continues to be the chosen platform for conversation; in 2014, 20% of Bronfman alumni shared their thoughts in over 380 posts.

Weekly D'var Torah Emails: Weekly Torah insights written by Bronfmanim and staff are read by over 35% of the community.

Annual Publication: In 2014, the organization began fundraising for its core Fellowship programming for the first time. As a result, staff created an annual report to highlight the community's impact. As of June 2015, over 70% of the \$120,000 annual fundraising goal has been raised.

Thanks to Edgar Bronfman's vision and the dedication of its staff, the Bronfman Fellowships have created a remarkable Jewish community for those who share a passion for learning and questioning, wish to gain the skills to make a difference in the world and want support from a powerful network of over 1,000 high-impact alumni.

The Bronfman Fellowships is a 501c3 operating foundation that receives core support from an annual grant from the Samuel Bronfman Foundation and additional funding from individuals donors and foundations.

To learn more about Bronfman Fellowships' alumni community, please visit: www.bronfman.org/alumni-life <<http://www.bronfman.org/alumni-life>>.

NEXT: Entwine

