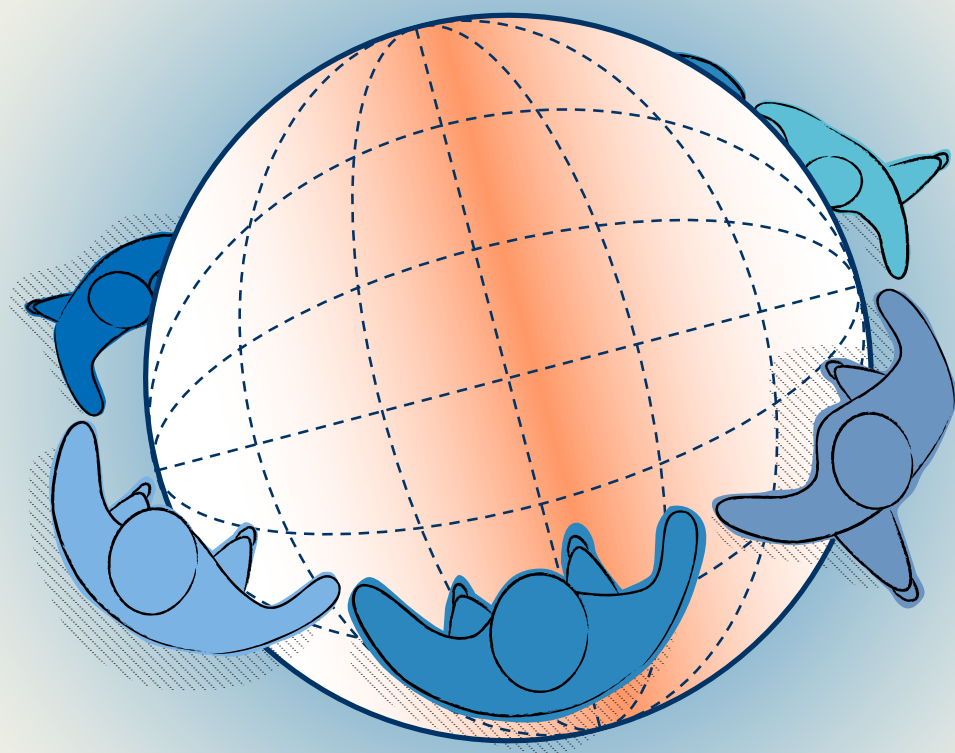


Brandeis University

Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Justice, Justice Shall They Pursue: Young Adult Interest in Long-Term Jewish Service Options

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Introduction

The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey found that over one third of young adults engage in volunteer activity (Lopez et al., 2006). The survey confirms what commentators have noted: among contemporary young adults, a substantial number has a strong commitment to social justice and is willing to act on those beliefs through advocacy and volunteer service (Greenberg, 2005). For many, an interest in social justice is linked to their religious identities. Thus, for example, the majority of Jewish college students indicate that leading a moral and ethical life and making the world a better place are the most important aspects of their Jewish identity (Sales & Saxe, 2006).

In keeping with its objective to “span the separations created by geography, culture, and

the requirements of daily life with a bridge built on the willingness of individuals in search of community, identity, and meaning,” the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies is exploring the development of extended volunteer opportunities for young adult Jews. Similar to the Peace Corps, the proposed program would engage recent Jewish college graduates in long-term service related to international relief and development efforts. The research was designed to gather information about the level of interest, motivations, means, and commitments of prospective participants.

Methodology

The current research included collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Web-based survey technology was used to gather information from the 2008 applicants to Taglit-Birthright Israel currently in their junior or senior year of college or in graduate programs.¹ Overall, 50% of Taglit applicants responded to the survey, including 7,700 in the upper years of undergraduate education or in graduate or professional programs: 28% of

respondents were juniors, 45% were seniors, and 27% were enrolled in graduate or professional programs. Female respondents (56%) were slightly overrepresented in the dataset.

Survey data were supplemented by focus groups and individual interviews conducted with undergraduates at eight campuses. Selected campuses met two criteria for

¹ Analysis of the characteristics of Taglit-Birthright Israel applicants (Saxe et al., 2007) shows that, on average, applicants appear to have received greater levels of Jewish socialization than Jewish young adults as a whole. However, although it is true that the average Taglit-Birthright Israel applicant is more Jewishly connected than Jewish young adults as a whole, the overall range of applicants covers the gamut from those with the most minimal backgrounds to those with the most intense.

inclusion: a large number or percentage of Jewish undergraduates and a track record as top recruitment sites for other long-term service programs, including the Peace Corps and Teach for America. In total, 41 students participated in focus groups or interviews. Survey and focus group questions focused on relevant prior experience with volunteer or social justice work, level of attraction to long-term service opportunities in general,

motivations for service, and reactions to specific elements of the proposed program (see Appendices A and B).

Findings

The straight line march from adolescence to adult status and identity has been elaborated to include a developmental stage called emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). This period of post-adolescent development between the ages of 18-25 has been characterized as a time of exploration and experimentation in all spheres of life. On one hand, this extended period of discovery creates the possibility for participation in long-term service in the years following college. However, young adults' desire for exploration is coupled with an insistence on maintaining their individuality and preference for settings that allow maximum choice and freedom. The following discussion integrates information gathered from surveys, focus groups, and interviews to describe young adults' decision making about long-term Jewish service.

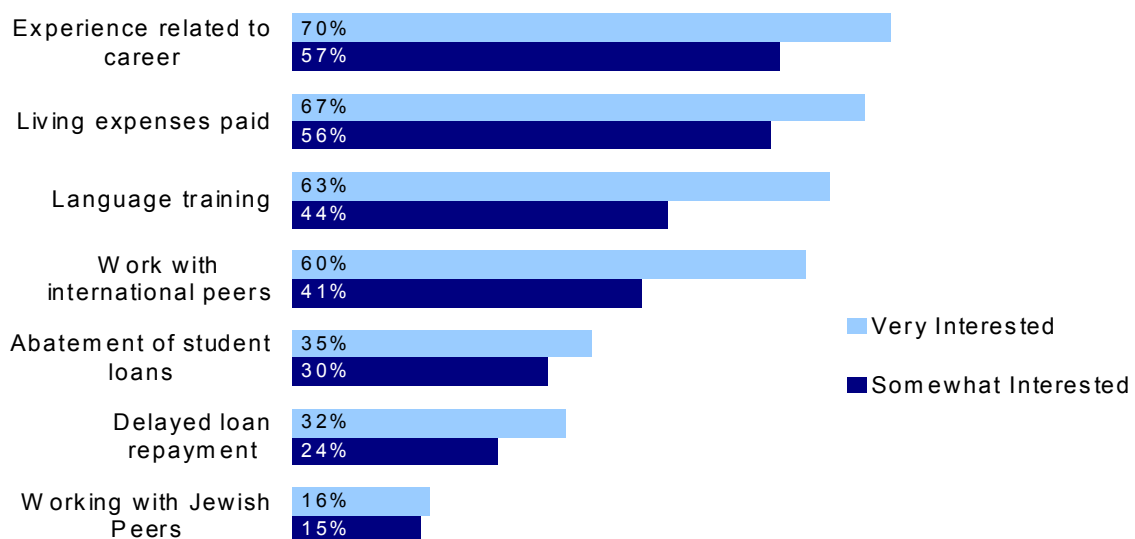
Overall, one third (33%) of survey respondents showed at least a moderate level of interest in long-term service options after college. About

half of these students (14%) indicated that they were "very interested" in this type of program. This represents almost 1100 individuals with substantial interest in extended service following college. Male and female respondents were represented in this group in sample proportionate numbers.

Not surprisingly, as compared with students who indicated little to no interest in long-term service, those who noted at least moderate interest had a history of greater involvement across the spectrum of service experiences. Among this group the most common forms of service work involved youth and/or educational programs. In addition, one quarter (27%) of respondents who expressed moderate to strong attraction to long-term service previously participated in an alternative break service program.

As Figure 1 indicates, young adults bring a host of concerns and desires to their decision-

Figure 1: Factors Contributing Strongly to Interest in Long-Term Service



making about extended service opportunities. Among those who express moderate to strong interest in long-term service, their strong desire to gain career-related experience is coupled with concern for the financial costs and implications of participating in an extended program.

Gaining Career-Related Experience

Both survey respondents and focus groups participants made clear that they are most drawn to post-college programs that will provide them with experiences related to their future plans for career or graduate education.

One of my questions for all post-college programs is ‘How is this preparing me for the next step?’ This program can’t prepare you directly for law school or help you with your LSATS. What is it going to offer me...educationally or with different opportunities to get me to the next place in life?

Participants in several focus groups suggested that the proposed program offer tracks to allow participants to choose an area of concentration related to their interests or career trajectories, such as education, health care, or sustainable development. In particular, several students who plan on attending medical school indicated that the program would be more attractive to them if they had the opportunity to focus on health care issues such as AIDS: “It would be good to make specific programs. I’m pre-med, I can go

work in a hospital there, or I can go work and learn work having to do with medicine.”

Financial Considerations

Although a sizeable subset of students may be very interested in long-term service options in the years following college, they are also very aware of the financial ramifications of delaying their entry into the job market or professional training.

You always have to weigh that against the financial loss you’re making. Especially when you’re in a competitive market when there are so few jobs available, every month that you spend working there is a month you’re losing a chance at a job where you can long term make money.

Most students described their ideal program as “revenue neutral” meaning that although they do not expect or need to earn a salary commensurate with their educational training, they cannot incur significant costs or added debt. Their threshold expectation is that the program will provide an adequate stipend to cover living and incidental expenses as well as transportation to and from the program site. Survey data echoed financial concerns raised in focus groups with over two thirds (67%) of those who indicate high interest in long-term service also indicating that it is very important for the program to cover living expenses.

If you're taking a year off, that means you're not making any money. And so if you're not making any money, you don't want to be spending a lot of money. And a lot of the programs I've already looked at...cost a lot of money. And so I don't see how I could do a volunteer program for a year.

Focus group participants also indicated that they would like to leave the program with some form of exit stipend or educational voucher that they can use to enter the next stage of their lives. Several focus group participants referenced similar arrangements offered by the Peace Corps and AVODAH.

Training Opportunities

Students want to make use of the skills they have already developed in their undergraduate education but they are also keenly aware that they may not possess skill sets related to the work they will be doing. As one focus group participant put it, "I know how to write a paper, but my liberal arts education hasn't taught me how to build a functioning portable water system for a community and that's often what's really needed." Echoing a concern repeatedly raised in focus groups, one student mentioned her disappointment with other service programs that do not provide adequate training and support for international work: "I do know people who had positive experiences...but not when they just get thrown into a country and they have very little experience with multicultural situations

and then they...don't know how to communicate with them."

In almost all focus groups, students inquired about the type of training participants receive and felt that this aspect of the program was critical to their interest. In thinking about the type of training that was preferred, one undergraduate described his very positive experiences working with Habitat for Humanity:

When you get on to the site, you're there early in the morning, and they teach you what you need to know for the rest of the day. So if you're going to build stairs, they say, this is how we're going to do it. And they have somebody who knows it better than you so that you can ask questions too. But you've learned something, so you come away from the day, and not only that, but during the day you're putting what you've learned to use to actually make a difference.

Focus group participants often inquired about the opportunities for language training and several wanted to know if *ulpan*-type intensive courses would be available. In addition almost two thirds (63%) of survey respondents with strong interest in long-term service indicated that the availability of language training would contribute substantially to their interest.

Peer Support/Connections

The proposed service program is distinctive from other long-term service options in two ways that are salient to the young adults interviewed: its team approach and the inclusion of young adult Jews from Israel and Europe. Sixty percent of survey respondents who indicated strong interest in long-term service options felt that the opportunity to work with peers from other countries would contribute substantially to their interest. Focus group participants were also very positive about the international character of the program and hoped that it could be extended to include Jewish peers from South America and South Africa: “I think it’s great to have global effort to do a global effort. I think that’s really cool.”

Many students were very positive about the team aspect of the program and appreciated the potential to create friendships with Jewish peers. Several students noted that they were intimidated by similar programs, such as the Peace Corps or the Volunteer Corps sponsored by American Jewish World Service which individually place volunteers in field positions. As one student said, “The Peace Corps is scary because you’re by yourself.” Another remarked, “I am there to volunteer, I also want to make friends and I want to have the feeling like I belong to something.”

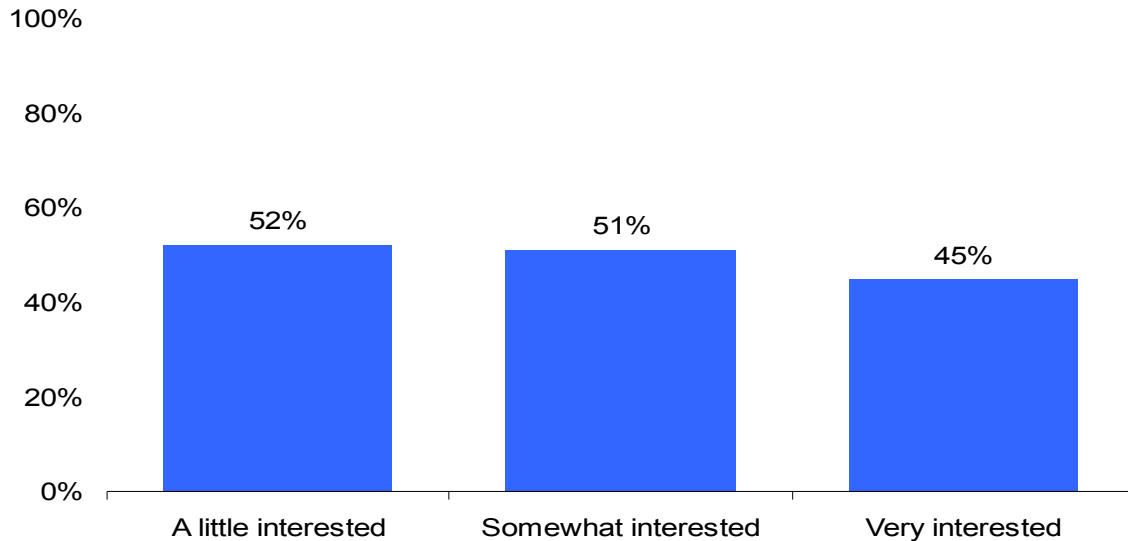
However, there were also several negative responses to the cohort concept. Some students were concerned that the availability of similar peers would deter participants from getting to know people in the local community. As one

student put it, being with a group of peers was “a really terrible way to try to integrate yourself in the [local] community.”

Sponsorship by a Jewish Organization

As part of the survey, respondents were asked how their interest in long-term service options would be affected by the sponsorship of the program. Jewish sponsorship increased interest for over four tenths (42%) of respondents, including those who expressed no initial interest in this form of post-college programming. As shown in Figure 2, Jewish sponsorship increases interest for a substantial proportion of respondents at all levels of interest in long-term service options. Conversely, Jewish sponsorship decreased interest for only a negligible portion (3%) of respondents overall and for only very small portions of those who indicate that they are a little interested (2%), somewhat interested (4%) or very interested (6%).

Figure 2: Impact of Jewish Sponsorship on Interest in Service Programs



Focus group responses indicate that many students see Jewish sponsorship as a positive way to bring together their interest in international service and their Jewish identity:

I like it because this component of Judaism speaks to me more so than other areas of Judaism. Because it's across humanity, it is so easy to understand and feel.

What's neat about this is I'm going to be in the middle of Africa... it's completely different than anything I've ever experienced— different people, different culture, different language, different everything. But there's still that Judaism aspect to it. That's a touchstone, and

that's why I'm attracted to this program.

This sounds right up my alley...it's very inline with my view of service work... it's from a Jewish perspective and serves humanity in general.

You'd be helping people that aren't Jewish, so it's really showing the world that Jews don't just help Jews, but that they do help others as well.

For more observant students, working under the auspices of Jewish organizations may be the only way that they can do international service work. Two thirds (66%) of those who indicated that they keep kosher both in and outside of their homes also noted that Jewish

sponsorship of the proposed program would increase their level of interest and, for almost one third (31%), the prospect of Jewish sponsorship greatly increased their interest: “Logistically, whenever I look at a program that’s one of the first things I think about—would it be possible for me to be kosher and observe Shabbat?”

It is important to note that although students were positive about the Jewish sponsorship of the program they had many questions about the Jewish nature of the experience. As one student succinctly put it, “Besides the once a month check-in, what would be Jewish about the program? The people?”

Many focus group participants have had mixed experiences with the Jewish aspects of Jewish-sponsored service or alternative break trips. Based on previous experience, they have concerns about how the religious diversity of participants will be handled: “I think it’s important to really set out at the beginning what exactly you’re going to be required to do Jewishly, or what exactly is going to be going on Jewishly.”

Finally, it is important to note that while they appreciated the Jewish sponsorship of the proposed program, a number of focus group participants felt some unease with the programs’ “Jewish exclusivity”: “If Jews are really interested in being engaged in the world community, they need to actually do that. That means being inclusive in who you accept.”

Authentic Work/Capacity for Impact

The overwhelming majority (92%) of students who expressed strong interest in long-term service indicated that they volunteer in order

to help people. Given this strong commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of others, many students were very concerned that future work have the capacity for making a lasting impact. They emphasized the importance of doing “authentic” work that provides the communities with sustainable solutions. Students also expressed concern with building relationships of respect and mutuality with the communities served so as not to be perceived simply as “service tourists.”

Am I being effective? What’s the point of my being here?
Am I just meeting these people and like having fun in another country, or working, but like, didn’t really do anything productive?

I don’t want to go in there and decide what we’re doing for them. They’d have to invite the help. If we are contributing, it should be in a sustainable way... When we leave, whatever is happening could continue.

Summary and Conclusions

Thomas Friedman (2007) has called contemporary young adults “Generation Q—the Quiet Americans...quietly pursuing their idealism, at home and abroad.” Influenced by the global media of music, movies, and the Internet, young adults have developed a perspective that is universal rather than particularistic and a concern for victims of poverty or injustice that is both local and global (Arnett 2002). In keeping with these trends, this research indicates that a sizeable number of upper-level undergraduates and graduate students have a strong interest in Jewish long-term service options. However, the research also makes clear that even those students most interested in extended service programs have important reservations about the goals, content, and structure of these experiences.

In responding to the proposed program, students described conflicts between those goals, values, and means that play a critical role in their decision making. Prospective participants want work that makes meaningful and sustainable change in the communities they serve, but at the same time desire experience related to their own career trajectories. While they are drawn to the potential for integrating their service work and their Jewish identity and for making connections with international Jewish peers, they are also troubled by the exclusion of non-Jewish peers. They are willing to volunteer for an extended period of time but are reluctant to incur significant costs or additional debt. They want to make use of the skills and interests they have developed in their undergraduate and graduate education but also desire adequate training for the specific work they will be doing.

The present research makes clear that there is a “market” among Jewish young adults for the type of extended service program proposed by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies. As with many efforts in the Jewish community, the key to the successful launch of this initiative is not just whether there is a discernable need for or interest in the program. Instead, the eventual impact rests on the development of a high-quality extended service program that meets the specific aims, concerns, and priorities of the target population.

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Appendix A: Online Survey

1. How interested would you be in participating in a 6-12 month post-college volunteer program in the developing world (e.g. Peace Corps)?

- Not at all interested
- A little interested
- Somewhat interested
- Very Interested

2. To what extent would each of the following increase or decrease your interest in participating in such a volunteer program ...

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. Sponsorship by a Jewish organization? | <input type="checkbox"/> Greatly Decrease |
| b. Sponsorship by a Non-Jewish organization? | <input type="checkbox"/> Decrease |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> No effect |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Increase |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Greatly Increase |

3. To what extent does each of the following factors contribute to your interest in a long term service program?

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| a. Working with other Jewish peers? | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at All |
| b. Financial support of living expenses during the program? | <input type="checkbox"/> A Little |
| c. Working with peers from other countries? | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat |
| d. Delay of student loan repayment during program? | <input type="checkbox"/> Very Much |
| e. Gaining experience related to future career plans? | |
| f. Abatement of some portion of student loans? | |
| g. Foreign language training? | |

4. Over the last year, how often did you engage in any of the following volunteer or social action efforts?

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | | ...through a Jewish organization? |
| a. Mentoring, tutoring or coaching youth | <input type="checkbox"/> Never | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| b. Helping in hospitals, nursing homes, crisis centers, shelters, or food banks | <input type="checkbox"/> Once | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes |
| c. Performing or assisting an arts/cultural organization | <input type="checkbox"/> A few times | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know |
| d. Campaigning for a political candidate | <input type="checkbox"/> Regularly | |
| e. Protecting the environment, wildlife, or animals | | |
| f. Serving as a volunteer EMT, fire fighter, or disaster relief worker | | |
| g. Lobbying for social issues | | |
| h. Raising money for charitable causes | | |
| i. Repairing or building homes | | |

5. People participate in volunteer or social action work for many reasons. How important to you is each of the following reasons?

- | | |
|---|---|
| a. To help people | <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all Important |
| b. To enhance your resume | <input type="checkbox"/> A little Important |
| c. To develop new skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat Important |
| d. To feel personal satisfaction | <input type="checkbox"/> Very Important |
| e. To have new experiences | |
| f. To gain hands-on experience related to your career | |
| g. To have fun | |
| h. To express your Jewish values | |
| i. To express your personal values | |

6. Have you ever participated in an alternative break service program or trip?

- No
 Yes

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

1. Tell me a bit about yourself. Your year in school, your major, your experiences doing community service or social justice work?

- Has any of that work been under Jewish sponsorship or for a Jewish organization?

2. What motivates you to seek out service opportunities?

3. Have you already or do you plan on studying abroad during college? Tell me about your experiences outside the U.S., such as study abroad or alternative break programs.

4. As you think ahead to life after college, what are your plans? Does volunteering fit into your plans in any way?

5. Some leaders in the Jewish community are developing a long term volunteer program for young adults similar to the Peace Corps. *[Distribute description of JCorps]*

- What are your reactions to this program? Would you want to participate if this program was offered?
- What is most attractive and what is least attractive about the proposed program?
- How do you feel about the Jewish elements of the experience?
- How do you feel about working with a peer group of Israeli and European Jews
- How do you feel about the development work you would be doing?
- How do you feel about the location in Sub-Saharan Africa?

6. Are there considerations (e.g. needing to pay back student loans or parental concerns) that might affect your attraction to a program like the one described in the handout?

Appendix C: “JCorps” Program Description

JCorps will unite young Jews from Israel, North America and Europe to dedicate six-eight months post-college to do relief work in Sub-Saharan Africa. The project is based on the belief that it is a core value of Judaism to make the world a better place to live, and that responsibility for humanity is central to the Jewish tradition.

JCorps will include teams of young Jews from Israel, North America and Europe working together in small teams in villages throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. There will also be an opportunity to do relief work in Israel.

JCorps members will come together for one weekend a month for check in and to share Sabbath in the field.

JCorps will enable young Jews to provide real and effective volunteer assistance to people in need by working collectively towards the loftiest goal of serving humanity.

The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University is a multi-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the study of American Jewry and the development of religious and cultural identity.

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