
Participant Audit: Who's Participating in Professional Development and Why

We have now finished collecting “audit” data about the profiles and motivations of participants in the 10 programs in the Jim Joseph Foundation’s Professional Development Initiative. In total, we have gathered data from just over 400 individuals over the course of three years.

With no further cohorts due to start, we now have an opportunity to take stock of the personal and professional profiles of those recruited by the programs and what motivated them to take part. We can then explore whether deeper analysis of these data yields insights of significance about what various populations seek from professional development experiences in Jewish education. Finally, while we have tended to avoid probing differences between the participants in the various programs, now that a full data set is available, we can investigate such differences when meaningful.

Most participants (70%) are women, a balance that probably reflects the make-up of the field. Most (64%) were under the age of 40 at the start of their program. They are fairly well-educated too, with about two-thirds having received an advanced degree of some kind. The great majority (92%) identify as Jewish, almost all of whom (92%) experienced some form of Jewish education during their school years. In fact, about a third experienced more than seven years of day school education, quite a sizeable minority. The participants with more intense Jewish educational backgrounds were more heavily concentrated in Ayeka, Makom/Moishe House, Next Gen, and YBC.

In terms of their professional profiles, the great majority (91%) are working full-time, a finding of interest in a field where overall about a third of employees are part-time. This seems to confirm that part-timers receive fewer opportunities to experience intensive professional development or are less inclined to do so. (SVARA, with 8 part-timers out of their total 20 participants, was the only program where there was a higher concentration.)

Slightly less than half of all participants (41%) do not have any managerial or supervisory responsibilities; they are “frontline” staff. The majority of these individuals (60%) have been in their sector for 5 years or less. By contrast, the majority of those who have supervisory responsibilities (60%) have been in their sector for more than 5 years, and 39% of them have been in their sector for more than 10 years. Overall, almost half of all participants (46%) consider themselves well established in their field. A minority (fewer than a fifth) can be classified as being in the earliest stages of their careers.

In previous years, we bemoaned the fact that new arrivals in the field of Jewish education were not generally taking part in these programs and seemed to be missing out on experiences that might have cemented their

interest in committing to the field. Now, informed by emerging data from our “On the Journey” study for CASJE that shows the positive relationship between professional development and professional retention, we’re wondering whether these programs may be playing a different, and no less important, role in cementing the readiness of more established educators to stay in the field.

Participants’ motivations for taking part in programs have been highly consistent over the three years. The top three motivations have been: “increased personal growth,” “increased professional skills and capacities,” and “increased opportunities for reflection on [one’s] work.” Overall, participants enrolled expecting to grow professionally in many ways, including increased confidence to do their work well, being better able to manage challenges at work, and gaining more knowledge of the content of their work. When it comes to material outcomes, however, only a small proportion of survey respondents (less than 20%) explicitly indicated that they signed up for programs expecting to increase their salary or job security, or secure potential promotion. Nevertheless, more than half of the participants (59%) did anticipate that as a result of participating in a program they would “enhance [their] professional credibility, in order to obtain a more senior position in the future.”

Further probing these motivations through Factor Analysis reveals that fundamentally people were drawn to the programs by two, not mutually exclusive, motivations: what we characterize as “**holistic professional growth**” (a desire to stretch, explore new ideas, and assume new roles) and “**professional self-efficacy**” (an interest in learning new practices, gaining new knowledge, and acquiring new leadership skills). These two concepts capture a great deal of what attracted educators. Across all of the cohorts, participants articulated a strong appetite for the former (3.67 on a scale of 1 to 5) and even more did so for the latter (4.13 on a scale of 1 to 5).

In probing these patterns, we wondered whether specific subpopulations were spurred more by one or the other of these motivations. We found a mixed picture: women were significantly more motivated than men by both concerns. Similarly, those who are less well established in their positions were also more strongly motivated by both concerns. At the same time, participants’ age, length of their tenure, or whether they are exclusively engaged in frontline work did **not** make a significant difference to their interest in these outcomes. We are therefore inclined to infer that while respondents might not explicitly state that they signed up for a program in the hope of achieving greater job security, those who were less secure in their jobs, and especially for women, hoped to get much more out of these programs.

It seems that the various programs attracted people with differing professional interests. Consistently, participants in the HUC Executive MA program, JCCA’s Sheva early childhood program, and JFNA’s Next Gen program signed up with significantly higher expectations across a number of measures than did recruits to other programs. This finding echoes the fact that these three programs tended to promise the most “transformative” outcomes to their participants: not just growth but also career advancement.

By contrast, participants in the various cohorts of M², Makom/Moishe House, and the Yiddish Book Center seem to have expected the least in terms of professional growth. Again, this makes sense. Most of M²'s programs were quite short, Makom/Moishe House participants did not think of themselves as professional educators, and YBC participants tended to come with very specific expectations for subject matter knowledge growth. In all three cases, participants seem to have signed up with relatively modest or focused expectations, even if ultimately their own growth might have exceeded what they expected.

Taking Stock

Overall, in terms of who they recruited, the 10 programs in the Professional Development Initiative mirrored the sectors they serve. In most cases, the programs drew relatively settled professionals rather than newcomers. Their participants tended to see professional development as a means by which, in the long run, to advance their careers and, in the short term, to grow personally and professionally. These aspirations seem to reflect the tenor of what the programs promised their participants: professional growth rather than professional transformation. There was more at stake for the women who took part and for those who were less well established professionally; these populations enrolled with higher expectations. And as we have learned from our Shared Outcomes Survey, expectations are often related to outcomes.

We do not know if our findings would have been different if a higher proportion of participants had been at earlier stages in their careers. Perhaps, they would have expected more both in terms of growth and advancement. As it is, the programs seem to have been relatively successful in drawing to them individuals well aligned with what they were offering. They did not over promise. As a consequence—and as we have seen through other data we gathered such as clinical interviews, outcomes surveys, and program director interviews—participants were highly satisfied with what they experienced. People got what they came for!