

Alumni Institute Remarks

February 2, 2024

Thanks so much, Ruthie! Good evening, everyone! I am so grateful for the incredibly warm welcome I've received at this Institute.

When I joined the Foundation team in July, I was intently focused on building the most incredible, amazing, life-changing Fellowship for emerging field professionals that I possibly could. At the same time, I worked to acclimate myself to the Wexner community -

- I set up zoom dates with alumni from both the Graduate Fellowship/Davidson Scholars Program and the Field Fellowship to learn about their experiences
- I attended a Graduate Fellowship Institute with class 33 where I learned about negotiation in this very ballroom
- I attended a Field Fellowship Institute the week after October 7th where I watched Field leaders process the changing demands of their work in real time

I entered into these conversations and experiences expecting to have my mind completely blown by an enduring lesson, a story of an incredible faculty member, or a life transition facilitated by this remarkable and wide-reaching community. And while all of those individual guesses turned out to be true, the universal message of the interactions I had felt oddly familiar...

I spent my final semester of college student teaching in an urban charter school in Springfield, Massachusetts, wrapping up the last portion of my teacher licensure process and preparing for my eventual move to New Orleans where I was set to begin my term as a Teach for America Corps Member in the fall.

All of us who were student teachers attended a weekly evening seminar where we shared our experiences in the classroom, asked questions of our very bright and excitable professor, and generally did a lot of kvetching.

During one session, we entered into a rather serious debate about homework. As the temperature rose, I could see on our professor's face that we were deeply, profoundly, undeniably missing the point of what he was trying to convey. He opened his mouth and I thought we were finally about to get some tough talk, but in a calm and measured tone, he told us something I'll never forget.

“Your job as a teacher is to create an environment where students like themselves as they learn your content.”

I only ever found this idea written down one time - in an article he provided to us that contained a series of letters between a 40 year veteran teacher and her plucky student teacher. She referred to it as *“calling in the cosmos.”* To clarify, calling in the cosmos does not mean hiding your lesson in a game, creating opportunities to win fun prizes, or bringing in guest speakers - FYI that didn't stop me from trying all of those in my first few years in the classroom. Creating an environment where students like themselves as they learn your content cannot be done through gimmicks and shortcuts. It happens in spaces where there is mutual trust, shared respect, and a clear connection to the impact the learner hopes to have on the world.

I carried this little sentence with me for the decade that I worked as an urban educator, and later as I transitioned into leadership development work at my local Federation.

Since leaving K-12 schools, I have seen this idea of “calling in the cosmos” perfectly executed in two places -

- The first is in episode 7 of season 2 of “The Bear,” the award winning restaurant “comedy,” where Richie, a profanity-loving curmudgeon is sent to stage/apprentice at a Michelin-starred restaurant. During the course of his week at the restaurant, Richie goes from polishing forks and complaining to wearing a suit and sort of watching his language. He carries the suit back to his home restaurant, and when someone comments on it, he responds, “I’m wearing the suit because it makes me feel better about myself.” **I am also told this is the least realistic episode of “The Bear,” but you can’t win ‘em all I guess.
- The second place is in the **Wexner alumni community**. In conversations with you, in online learning calls I’ve joined, in meeting you at conferences, and in reading every message to cross Wexnet since my first day on July 6th (probably in the thousands and I’m sorry I never have PDFs of the articles you’re looking for), you show such trust in this community - whether it’s asking for help with a question about a Hebrew name or seeking support with a challenge post October 7th. You openly disagree with each other, but taking the time to clarify it is not the individual person with whom you take issue, but the idea. Here, I see shared respect. When I have met you in person, you speak with joy about the impact the Fellowship had on your personal and professional growth. To me, it seems like your Fellowship directors were successful at “calling in the cosmos” for you. Just look how many of you have joined us at this Alumni Institute, some nearly 30 years since you started your Wexner journey.

While the content of the Wexner Davidson Fellowship will be enriching, actionable, and hopefully prompt new insights and deep reflection, what I am most looking forward to is bringing

together the next generation of Jewish communal leaders into a trusted circle who they'll learn and grow alongside for decades to come.

So, where is all of this lovely transformational growth going to take place? So glad you asked!

Let me get down to business and tell you about this new initiative!

- The Wexner Davidson Fellowship is open to North American Jewish communal professionals who are 26 - 36 years old.
- Each year, we will select a cohort of 15 Fellows to participate in the three year program, and we will add a new class each year.
- Fellows will come together for in person institutes twice a year, where they will benefit from leadership training and Jewish learning side by side.
- Between institutes, WDF will offer a robust personalized learning curriculum including:
 - small group coaching for the first year of the program and individual coaching for the following two years
 - a one-on-one Jewish educator for the entirety of the program
 - additional funds for professional development
 - and an immersive experience in Israel

When you review the eligibility requirements, I hope you are pleased to find that they are inclusive of the wide landscape of Jewish professional fields and experiences. This is intentional to ensure that we have a pathway for emerging rabbis and Jewish educators, alongside professionals from Hillels, day schools, Federations, JCCs, and camps, just to name a few.

As Wexner alumni, you are our best recruiters for this new venture. I hope you will share information about the program with those in your networks, and encourage people you know to apply. You can expect a message from me with further details when applications open later this

month. AND I hope you'll join me in welcoming our first Wexner Davidson graduates to Alumni Institute in 2028! :)

Before I wrap up – believe me, I don't want to stand in between you and getting to minyan on time!! – I want to offer deep gratitude to a few people without whom this wouldn't be possible. First, to Shana Kantor and her colleagues at the William Davidson Foundation, who are partnering with us on this new initiative. To have the support of not one but TWO teams who care deeply about the future of North American Jewish communal landscape... Well, I'm wondering if someone is reading my dream journal.

And to my incredible Wexner colleagues. Elka, Or, Jay, Ruthie, Stef, Trish, Dara, Tali, and everyone who isn't in this room, there are so many things I want to say, but truly, I don't know that even Taylor Swift has the right lyrics to express my gratitude to each of you. Thank you for never stopping at good enough, and for always asking, "Is there anything else we should try?" I have learned so much in the last few months, and I have felt so empowered to make bold choices to best serve this new demographic. So, in short, thank you for putting your beautiful noggins together and opening the door to this unbelievable opportunity for the future of our field.

And finally, to this group - thank you for loving this community, for showing me that "Wexner" is really a verb and not a proper noun, and for everything you do to make the learnings of the Fellowship real in our world.

Have a wonderful evening!