

**The Opportunities – and Challenges – of a Large and Growing Network**  
**Wexner Professional Leadership Programs Alumni Institute, February 2024**  
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Leadership is not a solo activity. Adaptive Leadership teaches us that we need allies and confidants. And depending on the work at hand, we may need partners, collaborators, mentors, coaches, or critical friends. We all know this intellectually, of course, but we don't always put it into practice.

In the months since October 7, though, this community sure did. While you've been deep in your own personal emotions, realities, and reactions to this horrific war; you've also been leading and holding your communities, congregations, colleagues, students, and staff - and you ALSO sought out your Wexner people. I watched the organic ways this network came together, almost immediately, on Zoom, to see each other's faces and to find strength in community. Class cohorts checking in with one another, some after years of being out of touch. Alumni initiating and planning meet-ups for various sub-groups of this network, online and in person. Wexnet posts from our alumni in Israel, sharing pieces of their experience - so hard, and so important - to read, and posts from more folks than usual contributing to exchanges about the war and its implications. And then, of course, we have this Institute - that all of you carved out the time to be here and with each other, speaks volumes about the need, and importance, of community.

Sometimes opportunities to connect and learn evolve organically, in the wake of crisis, shared losses, celebrations, or milestones. AND we can also put systems and structures in place to spark and facilitate new connections with intentionality. In my new role as director of this incredible alumni network, I've been doing a lot of deep listening and learning, research on best practices, and mapping of possibilities. I shared with you a set of goals, priorities, and initial programmatic plans in the Fall. What I'd like to share now are four broader observations about this network that run in the background of all of those plans. What I see as some of our greatest strengths as a network give way to potential liabilities – presenting two sides of a coin. These observations, and the questions they raise, shape and inform the way we connect with one another, the way we work, and the way we exercise leadership both within and beyond our Wexner world.

**1. We are a big network, and we keep growing.**

This network comprises nearly 600 alumni from the Wexner Graduate Fellowship/Davidson Scholars Program (Classes 1-32) and the Wexner Field Fellowship (Classes 1-5). Sidenote: almost every single one of these classes is represented at this Institute! Eventually, alumni of the Wexner Davidson Fellowship (which you'll hear about tomorrow) will join this network as well. With each graduating class, we eagerly welcome more potential collaborators, partners, and

people to learn from into this community. AND bigger is not always better. We're already too big to all know each other in a meaningful way. Increasingly, alumni will be coming from different fellowships, each with its own culture and norms. Even this Institute, with 150 alumni, is bigger than in years past - which, I imagine, may feel - simultaneously - awesome and too big (PSA: wear your nametags!). **So, as we look ahead to the future of this network, how do we maximize the benefits of our large, and growing, community while also ensuring the quality of relationships we've come to associate with Wexner?**

**2. We have diverse needs and interests.**

This becomes increasingly clear with every conversation I have. Alumni look to Wexner for all sorts of things. Professional development, skills-building, Torah learning, support groups, book clubs, job coaching, networking, in-person gatherings, online gatherings, opportunities to learn, and opportunities to play. Over the years, we have offered versions of all of these, which has created lots of entry points and ways to connect. AND, like any other organization, we can't be all things to all people, nor should we be. We have to stay true to our mission of strengthening Jewish communal leadership. With no shortage of great ideas, we have to prioritize and make decisions about how to allocate our resources. We have an opportunity to think creatively, to experiment with new ideas and models, and to find ways for more alumni to exercise leadership within this community. **What forms should the Foundation's increased investment in this alumni community look like? How do we best advance our mission of strengthening Jewish communal leadership - YOUR leadership?**

**3. This network now spans four generations.**

We have alumni who are retired and alumni who just completed graduate school, and every career stage in between. As a group, we have a tremendous wealth of expertise, experience, and knowledge. We take advantage of this in many ways, including our Mentoring Program, expertly run by Or Mars and Michelle Lynn-Sachs. AND - other side of the coin - sometimes the differences between our alumni of different ages and stages - in sensibilities, in language, in approaches to leadership - can create tensions that, at best, have us talking past each other and at worst, create misunderstandings and hurtful divisions. **How can we establish shared norms in, and for, a community that spans nearly 40 years (and continues to grow)?**

**4. We represent people at all stages of their careers.**

Within this network - within this room - we have supervisors and supervisees, senior rabbis and junior rabbis, students and teachers, someone applying for a job and someone who will be making the hiring decision for that job. These relationships create so much potential for effecting change as you enjoy shared language and leadership frameworks. AND power dynamics can be a really tricky thing. It makes it hard (or even impossible) for some folks to share as openly as they'd like, or were once able to, in Wexner spaces. This can be an issue for

both those with more power or authority, and those with less. And it plays out in person and online. **So how do we create a space that allows, and encourages, openness and honesty while recognizing the real-life dynamics that exist, both inside and outside, the Wexner context?**

These four observations – we’re a big network and we keep growing, we have diverse needs and interests, we span four generations, and we represent people at all stages of their careers – will be running in the background of our Institute program. I invite you to keep in mind the questions they raise, as they will inform our work here - and following this Institute. And our work will inform the questions we continue to ask.

Over the next few days, we have an opportunity to press pause on the day-to-day rush of our lives at home and at work; to slow down and settle into a more spacious sense of “conference time” and to engage in important conversations - zooming in and out from the particulars of our Wexner community to broader communal issues, from the the war in Israel to the leadership challenges we’re experiencing in our various spheres.

We will each bring our own perspectives, heartbreak, and hopes to these conversations. And, knowing that we wanted to focus on Israel at this Institute, I’m especially grateful to the Shalom Hartman Institute for accepting our invitation to partner with us. Reflecting their work both in Israel and North America, Hartman’s podcasts, articles, and journals have been really helpful to me personally - and I’m sure I’m not alone - as I try to make sense of this impossible war and what it may mean for our future as Jews and as Jewish leaders. We heard from a lot of alumni following last year’s Institute that you wanted to learn from faculty, so reaching out to Hartman - given their expertise and thought leadership, not to mention the number of Hartman staff who are also Wexner alumni - felt like an obvious choice. Working together in the lead-up to this Institute has been the kind of partnership I’d wish on all of you - built on trusting relationships, aligned in vision, smooth, and easy. With special thanks to my primary planning partner, Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield, Chief Executive Officer, I want to thank the Hartman team for being here.

I also want to thank Naomi Adland for serving as Chair of this year’s Institute, for being a creative and thoughtful co-designer of our program.

To my Wexner colleagues:

- Rabbi Elka Abrahamson, President
- Or Mars, Vice President
- Rabbi Jay Moses, Vice President
- Dara Katzner, Program Coordinator for the Wexner Field Fellowship and Wexner Service Corps

- Jess Reback, Director of the Wexner Davidson Fellowship
- Trisha Taylor, Program Coordinator for Wexner Graduate Fellowship/Davidson Scholars Program, Wexner Davidson Fellowship, and for this alumni network
- Ruthie Warshenbrot, Director of the Wexner Field Fellowship
- Dr. Tali Zelkowitz, Director of Curriculum and Research

Thank you for your contributions to this Institute, and beyond. Our work requires a team effort, and I feel so lucky to have you as teammates. [please sit]

I'd be remiss if I didn't give two special shout-outs:

- Jess Reback joined our staff in July as the Director of the Wexner Davidson Fellowship. She brings tremendous vision, energy, and experience to the work, which you'll see as you connect with her here. Wexner Davidson Fellows will be so lucky to have her as their leader and mentor. Please join me in extending a special welcome to Jess.
- And to my partner in this work day-in and day-out, without whom we literally would not all be here together...please join me in thanking Trish for handling all of the logistical and operations details of this Institute.

Speaking of the details, as you've seen, we are using two tech tools at this Institute: an online program schedule and text alerts. Our hope is that these tools are helpful to you as we ask you to honor our schedule and take responsibility for getting yourselves to sessions on time.

And one last word of thanks for now. We have a wonderfully rich program for our next few days, and that is because you built it! To our elective leaders, minyan leaders, group facilitators, Divrei Torah speakers, poetry readers, and musicians, thank you. And to each of you, thank you for being here, for prioritizing this precious time together. Your being here makes this Institute, and this community, better.