
Developing the Next Generation of Jewish Community Leaders: WGF/DSP Strategic Assessment Executive Summary

Introduction

For over three decades, the Wexner Graduate Fellowship/Davidson Scholars Program (WGF/DSP) has provided graduate school funding, intensive leadership development, and ongoing professional networking and support to emergent North American Jewish leaders in the rabbinate, the cantorate, Jewish education, communal leadership, and Jewish studies. Today, as WGF/DSP participants undergo a generational transition and Gen Z members begin to fill the cohorts, the Wexner and Davidson Foundations are reflecting upon questions such as:

- At what time of life and career stage can leadership training have the greatest impact?
- What are the pros and cons of targeting a leadership development program to graduate students?
- What are the skills, abilities, and perspectives that the leaders of the future will need to possess?
- How does Gen Z differ from the age cohorts that came before, and how do these differences inform the responses to the preceding questions?

The Wexner Foundation engaged Rosov Consulting to undertake research that would help answer these questions. To do so, the Rosov team conducted over 60 interviews with four groups of key respondents: current and past Wexner Foundation professional leaders; “field leaders” including WGF/DSP alumni from Classes 1–15, pilot Wexner Field Fellows, and additional communal leaders; recent WGF/DSP alumni from Classes 23–29; and directors of peer leadership development programs both within and outside of the Jewish community. These interviews explored respondents’ perceptions of the most pressing issues and challenges facing Jewish communal leaders; the knowledge and skills that leaders will most need to address these challenges; the pros and cons of providing leadership development interventions at different career stages; and, for WGF/DSP alumni, reflections on their program experience and suggestions for the future.

Exploring WGF/DSP Selection Timing and Eligibility

Benefits of Targeting Graduate Students

Graduate School is a Unique Time of Openness and Flexibility

Many alumni described the graduate school years as being a unique and valuable time of “openness” to learning, envisioning different career paths, having their views challenged and perhaps changed, and forming bonds with peers that can last for decades. WGF/DSP timing strikes the right balance of targeting people when they are far enough down the path of committing to a field but still able to have their future meaningfully shaped by the experience. In addition, there is the practical dimension of the greater flexibility in time and schedules that most graduate students enjoy compared to those already in the work world.

The WGF/DSP Supplements Graduate Programs’ Content and Connections

The WGF/DSP fills in important gaps in the graduate school experiences for many participants. Some reported that the program provided important leadership and communication “tools” missing from their curricula. Others emphasized that it alleviated the often stressful and isolating setting of graduate school, or offered a social and intellectual balance to a community with different perspectives and priorities.

Graduate School Funding Can Enhance Learning and Benefit Careers

Although nearly all alums emphasized other positives of their WGF/DSP experience (bonding with their cohort, learning about leadership, personal growth, etc.) a number named the stipend as a significant benefit of the program and a critical support for them and/or their peers. For some, the funding was one (though not the only) factor in their decision to apply to their graduate programs and enter the field. Others reflected that even if they were able to afford the costs of graduate school, by reducing the financial load the stipends enabled them to focus on their studies and/or have their career paths not be driven by salary considerations.

Challenges of Targeting Graduate Students

Leadership Curriculum is Not as Relevant

The most frequently cited challenge of being a graduate student during the WGF/DSP was that the insights shared in the leadership sessions didn't feel as relevant as they would later in one's career. This was often expressed as wishing one could "do the program again now." One alum noted that the two core elements of the WGF/DSP—community and content—have different value at different stages: while networking and community building were more valuable at the time, the leadership lessons have greater potential impact for more seasoned professionals.

May Miss Out on Identifying and Impacting Some Future Leaders

The larger challenge for the field of targeting graduate students is potentially not reaching and impacting some excellent future leaders at all due to their ineligibility. Recruiting only graduate students also means that any challenges graduate programs may have in reflecting the full diversity of the Jewish population will "trickle up" to the WGF/DSP. The pool of potential leaders who don't attend a standard graduate or rabbinical program may well grow over the next decades, given that Gen Z [is more open to alternatives to formal education](#). A field leader described how the already strong demand for online and low-residence programs accelerated during the pandemic, with applicants becoming even more reluctant to relocate and take on the financial burdens of full-time graduate school.

Alternate Fellowship Models to Consider

1) Graduate Fellowship with Later Program Entry

A few of the alumni we spoke with had attended shorter graduate programs (e.g., two- and three-year MA programs) and thus were in professional positions during the last 1–2 years of the Fellowship. All said that they found this experience highly valuable, both because the leadership content became immediately more relevant once they were in the work world, and because the WGF/DSP leadership and faculty served as important mentors and guides during the job search process.

2) Joint Graduate Student/Early Career Fellowship

A few WGF/DSP classes included participants in the pilot Field Fellowship, before it was launched as a separate program. Members of these classes—both Graduate and Field Fellows—reflected on how valuable it was to share their experience with and learn from those at a different career stage. Of course, a mixed cohort runs the risk of splitting into factions if the bonds between those in different stages aren't facilitated. But if the integration is successful, a joint fellowship would also have the benefit of drawing from a much larger potential pool of applicants that includes both those who never attended graduate school and those whose leadership potential wasn't apparent until after their graduate school years.

3) Separate Graduate School Funding and Leadership Training

Some interviewees suggested that both graduate school funding and leadership development could remain priorities, but do not necessarily need to be linked. For instance, a smaller amount of funding could be provided to larger numbers of graduate students upon entry to their programs. Then, a separate leadership development program could serve smaller cohorts selected both from the pool of funded students and others who demonstrate great leadership potential, both within and outside of graduate programs.

Exploring the Skills and Abilities Tomorrow's Leaders Need

Address Critical Challenges While Respecting Diverse Viewpoints

There was remarkable consensus among those with whom we spoke regarding the critical challenges and issues facing the Jewish community today and likely well into the future. Most frequently cited were:

- Navigating issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Polarization around politics, Israel, and Jewish identity
- Power dynamics in the Jewish community, including the influence of big funders
- The impacts of technology—both opportunities (new modes of engagement) and challenges (how social media impedes meaningful communication)
- Global challenges that transcend but deeply impact the Jewish community (e.g., climate change, financial struggle and inequity, and rising authoritarianism)

While leaders of all ages are grappling with these pressing issues, we know that the members of Gen Z who are or will soon be moving into leadership positions often bring different contexts and perspectives than their predecessors (as found in the recent [Pew Research Center study of Jewish Americans](#)). Field leaders and alumni described areas of tension that they have seen arise between older and younger generations, often around different conceptions of the value of Jewish unity, community, and continuity, and/or demonstrations of passion or impatience (depending on one's perspective) in working toward social change. The challenge for the WGF/DSP will be figuring out how to guide participants in expressing this passion within an environment committed to pluralism, dialogue, and community building.

Support Mental and Emotional Wellness and Resilience for Oneself and Others

During the past 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of mental wellness and resilience—in and out of the workplace—have become more prominent than ever. As Gen Z moves into professional roles and leadership, they bring with them both greater awareness of these issues and potentially more need for support and resources to address them. A number of interviewees said that in their younger colleagues they see “not as much resilience,” but also “different paradigms for what work could or should be,” leading to less tolerance for conditions that lead to burnout. Research shows that this generation was struggling with these challenges even before the upheavals of the past few years; the 2019 report [GenZ Now: Understanding and Connecting with Jewish Teens Today](#) reported that among the Jewish teens surveyed for the study, 69% said they and their peers needed help “managing anxiety and depression.” Should the WGF/DSP incorporate more mental health training and support, it would be aligned with peer fellowships that are increasingly prioritizing mental wellness as a key component of leadership.

Create Jewish Engagement through Entrepreneurialism and Technology

As is well known, the ways that Jews engage with Jewish life and community—to the extent that they do at all—has changed significantly over the past 30 years as new organizational and technological pathways for connection have emerged. Current and future Jewish leaders need to be able to articulate and “sell” the value of Jewish life to a population that won't naturally gravitate to Jewish settings as they might have in the past, which often requires facility with technology and social media that many (particularly older) Jewish leaders don't possess. The potential ways for the WGF/DSP to incorporate entrepreneurialism and technological skills into its leadership curriculum are numerous, and perhaps best devised by the Gen Z participants who will soon have an opportunity to put their stamp on the program.

Ownership of Learning Facilitated by Coaching/Mentoring

While the shared cohort experience of the WGF/DSP is one of the most impactful dimensions of the program, we heard from some peer program directors who work with emerging leaders that participants increasingly are seeking more self-designed experiences and autonomy over their learning. We know that individualized professional development benefits greatly from pairing learners with coaches and mentors who can offer both guidance and empowerment. Currently, the WGF/DSP community provides opportunities for alumni to mentor each other, and participants often turn to Foundation leadership for advice and coaching. However, a few interviewees suggested that incorporating either coaching or mentoring more formally into the core WGF/DSP experience—whether during the program, for all alums (rather than just those who actively seek mentoring), or as a skill to be taught—would be a valuable enhancement.

Conclusion

The consensus among those with whom we spoke is that, in its fourth decade, the WGF/DSP is still an exemplar of leadership development in the Jewish community. In no way do people see the program as fundamentally “behind the times” or out of step with the current needs of the Jewish community. Still, there are opportunities for the WGF/DSP to go “from strength to strength” by exploring such options as:

1. Alternate models for selection timing and/or eligibility that might combine the benefits of both a graduate and early-career Fellowship.
2. Building on current curricular elements around “challenging conversations” to develop Institute sessions that address the pressing issues facing the Jewish community today and in the future. Such sessions would both explore these issues and provide tools for facilitating conversations about polarizing topics in a context of pluralism, respect, and community building.
3. Creating space within Institutes and other dimensions of the WGF/DSP to support mental and emotional wellness, including sessions or conversations that address wellness and resilience in the workplace as a critical leadership issue.
4. Developing opportunities for WGF/DSP participants to learn about and gain facility with entrepreneurial thinking, new technologies, and social media. In addition to Institute sessions with speakers/facilitators who are experts in these areas, participants could mentor each other and create working groups to explore and experiment together.
5. Incorporating coaching as a formal element of the WGF/DSP, either during the program years (particularly if participants spend their later program years in professional positions) or in the initial alumni years after graduating (the current volunteer mentoring program could still exist alongside this coaching as an additional resource).

Based on our research, we believe that these represent potentially fruitful directions that will help the WGF/DSP to remain on the innovative edge of Jewish leadership development, draw a more diverse pool of candidates, and enhance the capacity of participants to positively impact Jewish life and address the looming challenges that the Jewish community will face during the coming decades.