

Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program

2023 IMPACT REPORT



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Introduction



The Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester launched the inaugural cohort of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program in early 2023. Inspired by Jay Birnbaum z"l's passion for the Rochester Jewish community, the program was created for the purpose of cultivating emerging local Jewish leaders. Through building relationships, learning about leadership through a Jewish lens, and exploring Jewish identity in a unique and creative way, the program serves as a springboard for involvement. The vision of the program is bold: Alumni of the program serving on committees and boards of every Jewish agency, synagogue, and organization in Jewish Rochester, using the knowledge and skills gained over the course of this one-year program to benefit the wider Rochester community. We are already seeing its impact.

Leora Rozin

Director of Leadership Development
The Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester



What a wonderful year of learning and growing it has been. When we originally designed the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program, we hoped we would be able to convince young adults to invest in themselves and their Jewish community. We were delighted to find that not only were young adults in Rochester looking for an opportunity to deepen their Jewish identity, they were also looking for ways to build community with each other. Through dinners and discussions, a community of young adult leaders has coalesced in the Rochester Jewish community, full of ideas, questions, and energy. A common refrain was wishing for more time together! We know that Rochester will build upon this first success with continued work with this demographic – both by harnessing the volunteerism of this year's Jay Birnbaum fellows and by creating a second cohort. It has been our pleasure, truly, to learn with and grow with these leaders.

Rabbi Julia Appel

Senior Director of Innovation
Clal – The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership

What

An opportunity for Jewish young adults in Rochester to gather in meaningful conversation, learning, community-building, and connection

Who

Led by the Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester and Clal - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, the program featured all four faculty of Clal in in-person gatherings with 26 young adults.

When

February, 2023 to January, 2024

100%

of participants would recommend the program to others

81%

of participants rated their experience a 4 or 5 out of 5

“

I'm so thankful to have participated in this program. I'm forever indebted to all who had a hand in making it a reality!

”

Achieving Goals of Program



My understanding of others' relationships to Judaism and Israel, my own relationship with Israel, my own relationship with the Rochester Jewish community has changed.

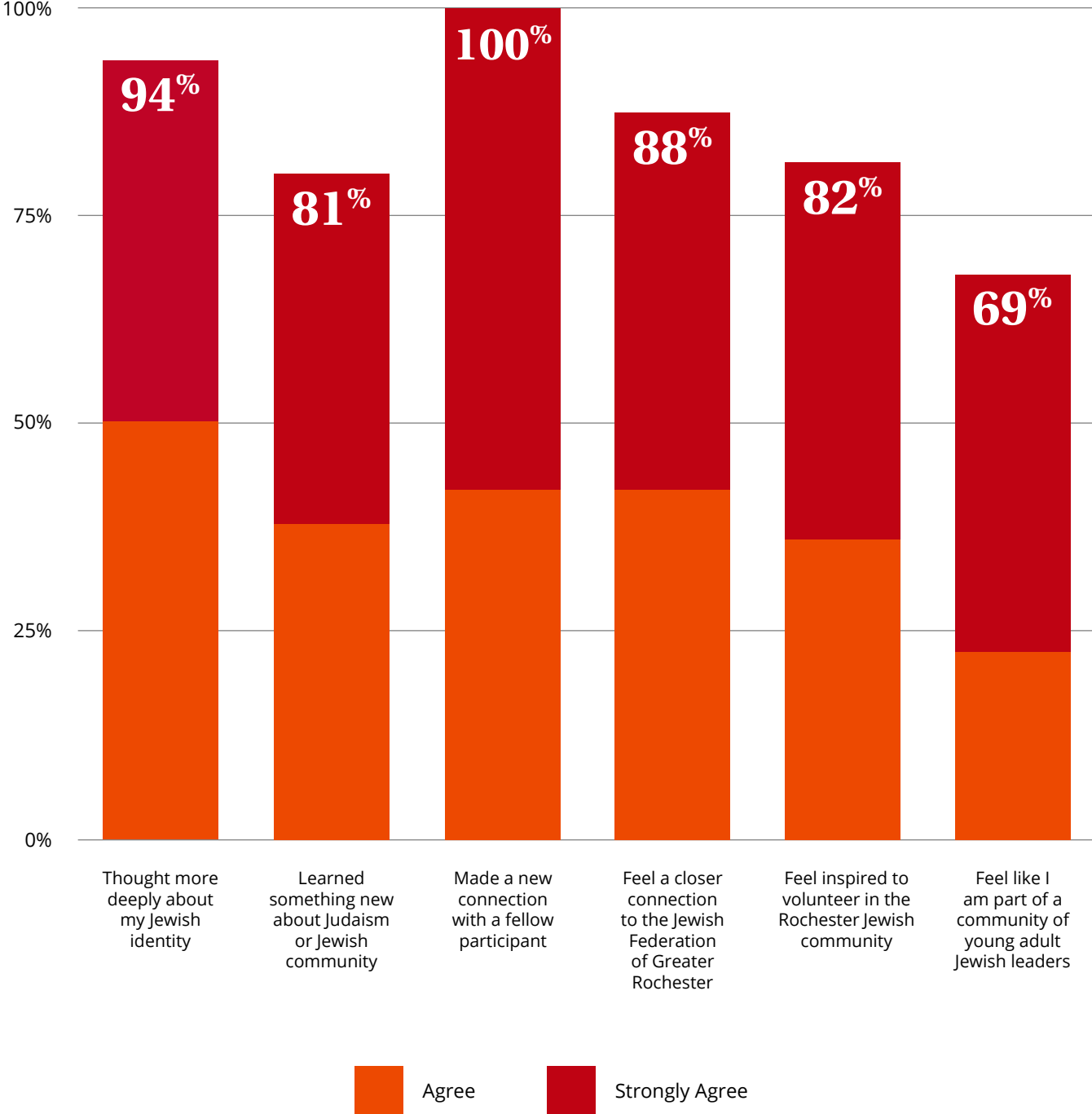
I have a stronger connection to my own Jewish identity and understanding of how to lead in a variety of ways in the community.

The Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program was designed to bring young Jewish adults in Rochester into greater leadership in the Jewish community. As opposed to other Federations' young adult leadership divisions, which often focus on philanthropy and events-based networking, this program was created to delve into meaningful topics of interest to participants; to provide an on-ramp for volunteer leadership within the community's institutions; to form relationships and among young adults; and to connect participants more deeply with Federation and its opportunities for impact.

The program was by application, so that the group would be selective and high quality. Staff received nominations from community organizations, in order to identify young adults outside the main networks of Federation. Once selected, participants gathered monthly over the course of 2023. Each gathering was held at a community volunteer's home (although occasionally at a Federation agency), featuring a delicious informal dinner, a welcome from the host, a speaker who shared their volunteer experience in the Jewish community, and a Jewish learning session with a Clal faculty member. Clal faculty members are all rabbis and experts in their fields who create leadership trainings for Jewish professionals and lay leaders across North America.

Overall, the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program was very successful at achieving its stated goals.

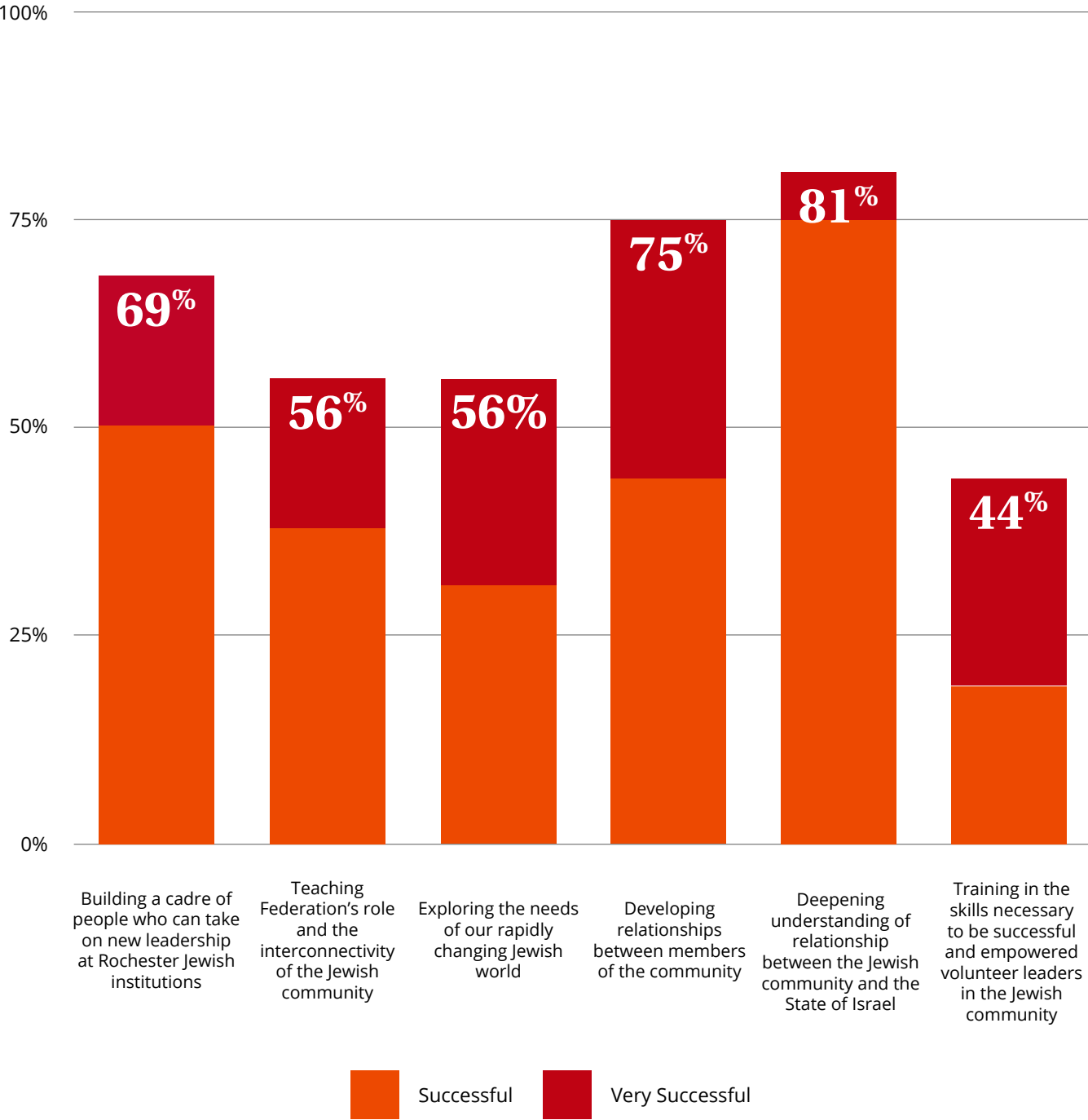
Because of the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program, participants...



Participants are likely or very likely to...



Participants reported that the program was successful or very successful at...



Content



“

My whole Rochester Jewish experience is changed from this experience! Great text study! Artful discussion frameworks. The rabbis from Clal were exceptional.

”

Overall, the participants found the content of the gatherings meaningful, thought-provoking, and excellent quality. In fact, a common refrain was that participants wanted more time for discussions and many even requested homework they could do beforehand to get more out of the sessions.

Jewish learning and big ideas

The learning sessions were the foundation of the program. Featuring the faculty of Clal - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, each session delved into a major topic in the Jewish lives of participants. The topic list was developed in collaboration between the Jewish Federation of Greater Rochester staff and Clal. The program staff made the decision to focus on big discussion issues, as opposed to technical skills of leadership, to make best use of the Clal faculty and discussion potential of the group.

Overall, the learning sessions were quite successful. Participants shared that the learning and connection with Clal faculty were a highlight of their experience. For many, the opportunity to give themselves the time and space to think about big ideas and reflect on their Jewish identity and Jewish journey was invaluable. Of particular note was the session after October 7 with Rabbi Elan, which was cited by a number of participants as a powerful way to come together with other Jews and process their feelings about what happened. Some participants wished for more small group time, as they felt it would enable them to get to know peers better. Many noted that more time in discussion was needed, but also that with any of these topics, more time might always be needed. Finally, a small number of participants wanted more practical application of the topics or more practical leadership skills.

Recommendations

1. Prior to each learning session, assign optional pre-work (articles, videos) so that when participants arrive, they are able to delve deeper into the topic during the discussion.
2. Clarify in marketing materials that the learning topics will be big ideas, as opposed to practical leadership skills like leading meetings or creating budgets, because the thing leaders often lack is time for these big ideas discussions. This will help participants have accurate expectations for the learning.
3. At the end of each learning session, spend a little more time connecting the discussion topic to the everyday life of participants - how might they apply this?
4. Consider adding additional optional, informal gatherings between the monthly learning sessions for participants to continue the conversation if they want to - at a bar, restaurant, living room, or park. This would enable participants to feel they had enough time to fully discuss the ideas raised, while also keeping the monthly gatherings to a reasonable length of time. Could be participant-led to add additional leadership opportunities.



Desire to volunteer and take action together

One piece of feedback that surprised staff was a clear desire to volunteer together as a cohort and take action as leaders.

Most participants became interested in volunteering in the Jewish community during their time in the program, including when being exposed to specific agencies or leaders. They felt inspired by what they learned, but felt that there was no expectation for people to volunteer or the opportunity to sign up right when they visited an agency. Additionally, they were motivated to volunteer as a group, which would make their experience both more enjoyable and more meaningful.

Recommendations

1. Build group volunteering into the program from the beginning. Perhaps participants could rank their preferred volunteer opportunities at registration, and small teams could be assigned based on participant preferences about impact areas. For example, four participants wanting to work on poverty issues could volunteer together at the food bank several times during the program year, scheduled right from the beginning of the program. This would also allow further small group

relationship-building. Possible organizations include:

- **Poverty:** Jewish Family Services/Food Cupboard
- **Aging:** Jewish Senior Life
- **Israel:** Federation
- **Diversity and understanding:** Levine Center to End Hate
- **Antisemitism:** Center for Holocaust Awareness

2. Have volunteer small groups also meet with leadership of the agency they are volunteering with. This would address the desire to create future leadership opportunities, would create additional mentorship, and would show the nuts and bolts of how organizations run. This would also address those who were seeking more practical skills, because they would be able to, for example, observe board meetings or discuss the budget with their organizational mentor.
3. Alternatively or alongside the volunteering opportunity, consider creating a mentorship opportunity so that those seeking more practical advice on communal leadership can be matched with a one-on-one mentor to discuss questions around boards, budgets, meeting facilitation, strategy, etc.

Community Building





I made new connections and got to know people I may not have crossed paths with otherwise.

I'm more aware of the nuances of leadership in Rochester and what to do to get connected.



Making new friends and Jewish peers

By far the most cited benefit of the program was developing a community of Jewish friends and peers. Participants deeply appreciated building new friendships; several said it was the first time since Birthright or sleepover camp that they felt a real sense of Jewish peer community. The connections made during the program were so successful that many participants wished for more opportunities to be together – whether they be additional discussion opportunities between learning sessions (see recommendation above), more purely social events (including, potentially, partners or children); and more opportunities for being in small groups with each other. The size of the group was cited several times as a challenge, in that the large group made it harder to find one-on-one time with each other.

Recommendations

1. Keep the purely social gatherings that were piloted, in addition to the learning gatherings, to further these connections.
2. Create additional opportunities for socializing, small group connections, and ways for the group to continue their relationships with each other after the program ends.

Diversity

The program was very successful at not only recruiting a diverse group of participants, but also at making each participant feel that their kind of Jewish identity was welcome and embraced. Several participants who identified as culturally Jewish had been concerned when applying that this program might not be for them, but they were pleasantly surprised. Participants noted that you didn't have to be religious in a certain way in order to fully take part in the learning and discussion. One participant shared that they had never attended Hebrew school or studied Torah and didn't know Jewish learning was something they could benefit from, but they grew to deeply appreciate it through the program.

Many participants had concerns while applying that they would fit into the group Jewishly, from a variety of Jewish backgrounds, and the consensus was that participants felt at home, felt able to share, felt validated no matter their religious background, and that various identity constructs were broken down during the course of the program. Several participants expressed wanting even more challenge and opportunity for delving into differences, considering other views, or wrestling with big questions they weren't yet sure how to answer.

One thing that several people mentioned was that having community norms was important in such a diverse group. Although community norms were discussed at the beginning, some felt they should be reiterated throughout the program

Interestingly, the diversity of speakers didn't come across as well as the diversity of participants. Although participants loved the Clal faculty, they seemed to have the impression that Clal faculty were all of similar Jewish backgrounds ("Conservative"). However, each Clal faculty member was ordained by a different Jewish movement and has very different ways of practicing Judaism. Many participants also assumed themselves to be further left politically than Federation representatives, having the impression that Federation representatives were all to the right of center.



Recommendations



1. Further attention to exploring the diversity of the broader Jewish community, in addition to the diversity of the participant group itself, would welcome participants more. Clal faculty, community leaders, and community speakers might talk explicitly about their identity and background, in order to show the diversity of speakers.
2. Feature diversity in marketing the program – both of participants and of speakers. Ease the concerns some might have about applying by addressing the welcoming diversity head-on. In interviews prior to acceptance, ask what being a leader means to applicants and how they respond to difficult conversations or being challenged by opposite ideas, to make sure that participants are united in their interest in diversity and challenge.
3. Begin with community norms and reiterate them throughout the year, especially when discussion topics are anticipated to be contentious. In interviews prior to acceptance to the program, go over the group norms to ensure that participants support the expectations of how we will relate to one another.

Understanding the Rochester Jewish community

The program provided a good introduction to the organized Rochester Jewish community, including Federation. Participants appreciated hearing from many different lay leaders and Jewish communal professionals during the program and seeing different areas of town and leaders' homes. They appreciated visiting different community locations, which helped them become more familiar with the agencies and institutions of Jewish Rochester. Participants were motivated afterwards to continue their relationship with Federation and the agencies, asking for future ways to connect and lead.

At the same time, for participants who started the program unfamiliar with the organized Jewish community of Rochester, they were more likely to remain unclear about the various organizations and their relationships to each other and the program itself.

Recommendations

1. Be sure to explain from the outset of the program an overview of the organized Jewish community in Rochester, its various institutions and communities, and how Federation relates to them all. Also be clear from the outset why Federation has created this program and the goals for participants. This will particularly help those participants who start the program less involved in Jewish community.
2. Hold a half-day retreat kickoff to build community, understand the history of Jewish Rochester, and hear each other's stories



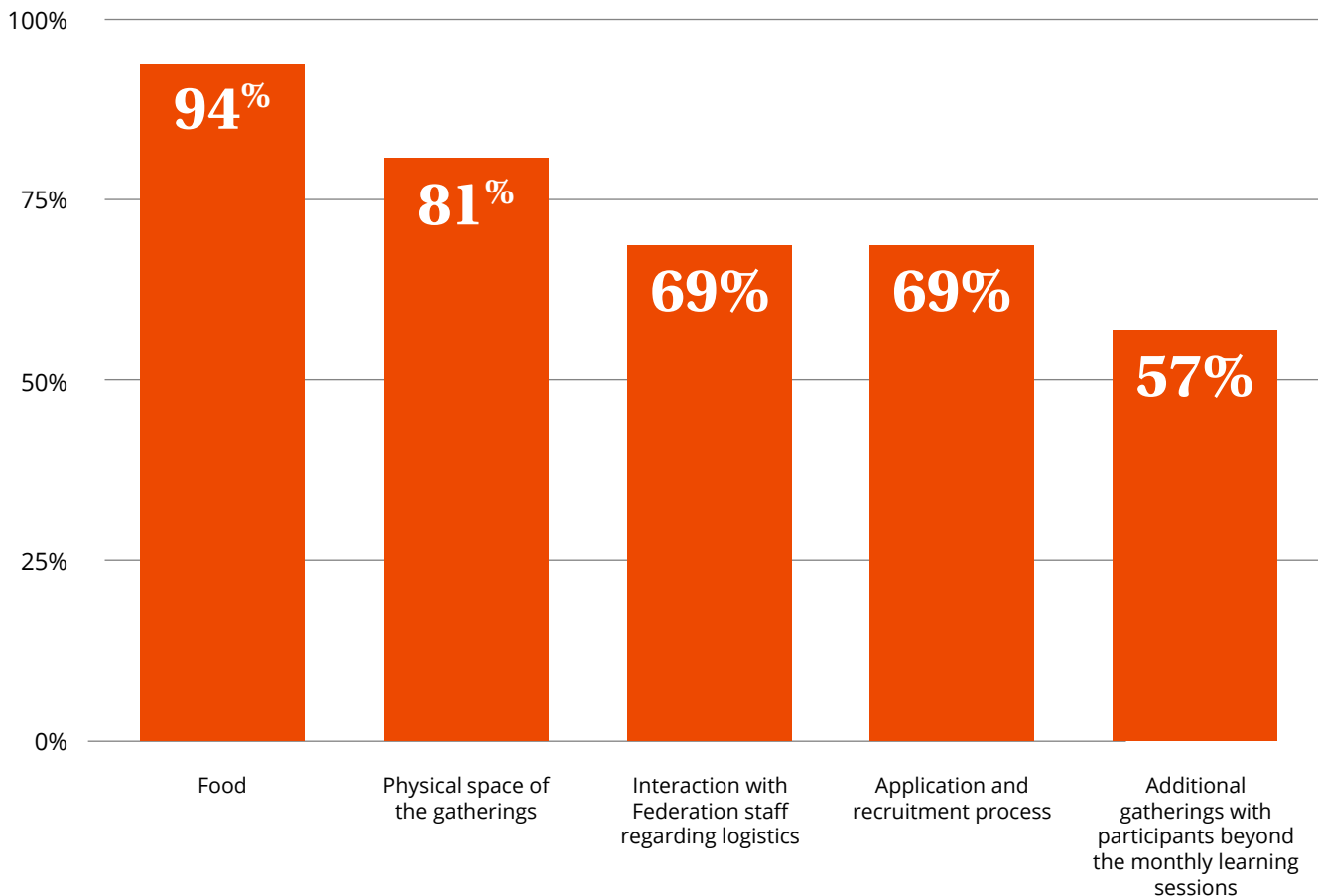
Program Logistics



I have an awakened sense of knowledge and pride in being Jewish.

The logistics for this new program had mixed but overall positive response. There are clear successes and also opportunities for improvement, which we are already incorporating into Cohort #2.

Participants who found the following successful or very successful:



Timing

Because the program was being developed as it was being advertised, the marketing didn't totally reflect the depth of commitment for participants. Some said that they were surprised at the additional opportunities for involvement between monthly gatherings, or that the gatherings were longer than they had anticipated. Others shared that they would be fine with even more time commitment (for example, assigning reading ahead of learning sessions or gathering in between sessions), as long as it was clear from the beginning.

Regarding the schedule, many participants felt that having the summer break in the middle of the program year made the experience feel uneven, and there was a noticeable decline in attendance and momentum after the summer break.

Shared meals

The shared dinners were a highlight of the program for many participants. The quality of food and the casual setting were overwhelmingly cited, with 94% of participants finding the food successful or very successful. Dinner time before the more formal group learning became an important part of the group bonding process, and did as much for community-building as the learning sessions themselves did.

At the same time, participants suggested that dinner time could be more intentionally used. Some found that they sat with the same group each time, and that they could have benefitted from structural encouragement to meet new people. Dinner could also have been utilized to start thinking and talking about the learning session topic.

Recommendations

1. Now that the program has solidified, be clear during applications what the time commitment is and what is optional.
2. Utilize the dinner time for both social mixing and topic exploration. Assigning small groups would mix up the participants and enable them to meet new people. This would have been a welcome added structure for around a third of participants. Discussion questions or table cards would also enable participants to deepen their dinnertime conversations with each other.
3. Cohort #2 of the program will launch in September and go through June, order to maintain momentum without a summer break in the middle.

Interest in Future Involvement



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My connection to the Rochester Jewish community has strengthened, as has my investment in its future. A great deal was invested in my participation for this program, and now I want to make payment back on that by enriching the Jewish community with what I learned.

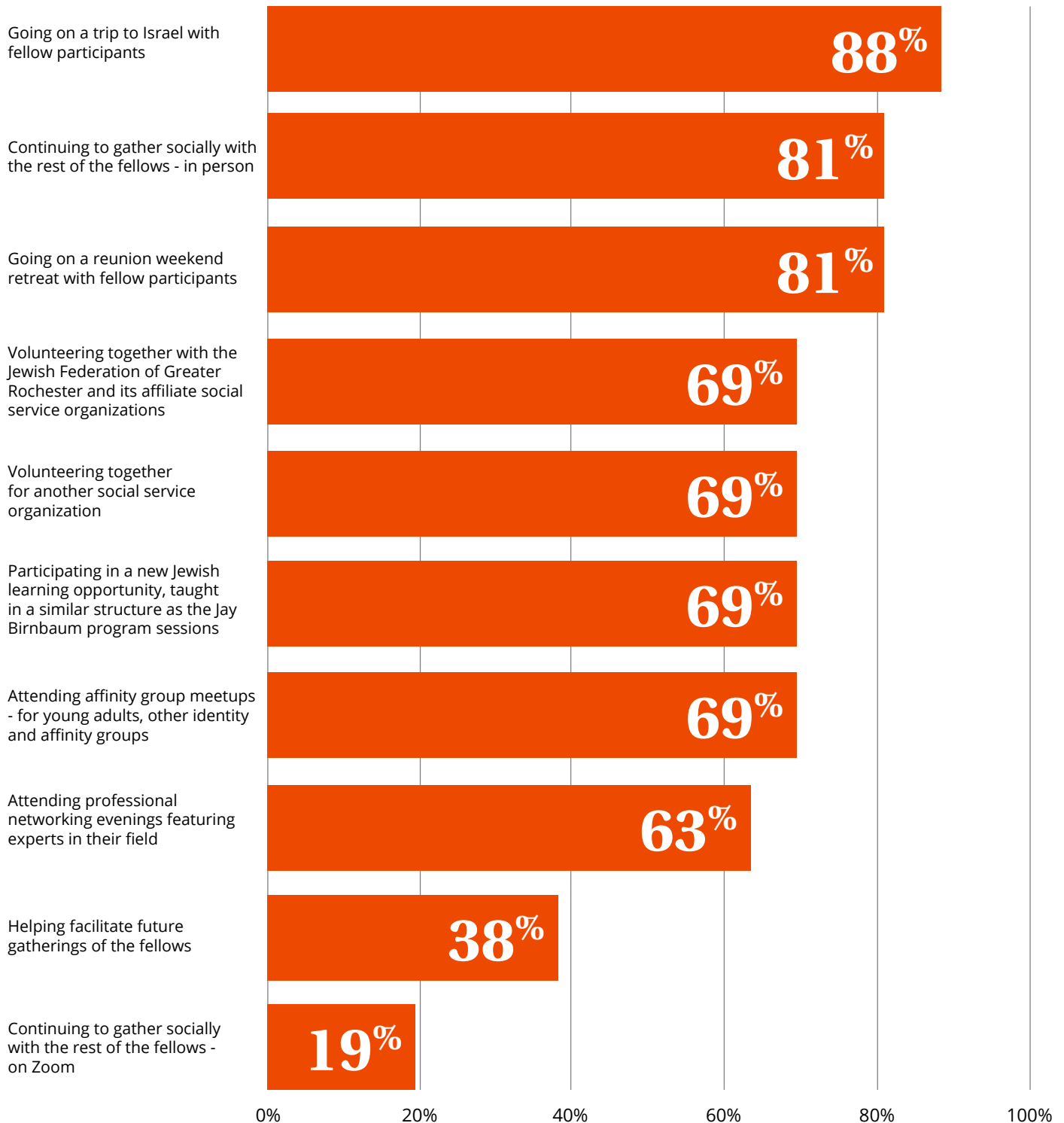
I'm stepping up and entering spaces I wouldn't have previously.

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Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program participants were very interested in both continuing their gatherings with each other and developing their participation in Jewish community volunteering. Real friendships were formed or deepened through the program, and participants want ways to

continue those connections. The program achieved its goal of inspiring greater volunteer engagement with the Rochester Jewish community, and participants are eager for an onramp and invitation to volunteer and serve in leadership roles throughout the community.

Which of the following would you be interested in participating in:



Recommendations



1. There is clear interest in participating in an Israel trip together and continuing to explore Jewish identity and community through this lens. It received the largest interest of all the options for continued connection. From the feedback, we would anticipate a strong response to such an opportunity, especially if it joined the first and second cohorts.
2. For hearing from other speakers: What if there were a quarterly Birnbaum Fellows salon featuring an outside speaker, to keep them connected to each other. Pipeline development too. Also what leadership roles could the Birnbaum fellows themselves take in creating these events.
3. They want to be tapped as community volunteers and start serving in volunteer and board capacities. Make an on-ramp.

Conclusion

The Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program was an important step in the Rochester Jewish community supporting and growing emerging leaders. It identified a group of 26 young adults who wanted to connect – with each other and with the Jewish community. Their thoughtfulness, self-reflection, commitment, and curiosity are a testament to the Rochester Jewish community's vitality. Continued investment in this demographic of leaders will yield even more emerging leaders, creating a new generation of high level community volunteers. Cities across the country face the challenge of engaging Millennial and Gen Z Jews. Rochester has taken a big step in the right direction with the Jay Birnbaum Leadership Development Program.

