THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE
Expanding the Concept

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Research can be a valuable tool in maximizing the effectiveness of services offered by the Jewish community. Because there is no single research paradigm, the challenge is to understand the various options and to determine which model would be most appropriate for a particular purpose. Three aspects of research—program evaluation, secondary data analysis, and literature review—have great utility for Jewish communal service.

The basic operative concept in research has traditionally been the discovery of new knowledge; the basic operative concept in the Jewish communal field has always been the delivery of service. These two conceptual frameworks are often viewed as being at odds—research projects are seen as competing with direct service for funding, space, and staff time, and at the same time, the research efforts are generally perceived as producing only limited returns.

Research is not unidimensional; there is no single paradigm or modus operandum. Rather, there are a wide spectrum of research activities ranging from the analysis of already available data to the extreme of the full-fledged experimental study that often needs to be performed in a laboratory setting in order to control extraneous variables. The challenge for practitioners in Jewish communal service is to understand the various options and to determine which of the many models are most appropriate for a particular purpose.

This article suggests that the Jewish communal field has held a narrow view of research as being both costly and necessitating a strong experimental approach. This perspective may unnecessarily limit the use of research as a tool for service. A broader viewpoint would allow research to include a quasi-experimental approach; that is, a methodology that clearly requires the systematic collection of information, but has less concern for stringent experimental controls. A second approach with great utility involves the use of already available records. This approach requires agencies to maintain well-documented records providing a wealth of data for analysis. Finally, there is a large body of research literature of which practitioners should actively take advantage; there is no need nor benefit to reinventing the wheel.

The combination of these three approaches—careful data collection in loosely controlled settings, systematic analysis of available records, and ongoing literature review—would allow research to take its place as a valuable tool for service providers.

The first section of this article analyzes the inherent dilemma posed by incorporating research into a service organization, i.e., using funds for research activities that would otherwise be allocated to direct services. It includes a discussion of the concept of deferred service whereby an agency will decide to deny some current needs in order to ensure that future needs are met more effectively and efficiently.

Presented at the World Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Jerusalem, Israel, July 5, 1989.

The author wishes to thank Les Cohen, Joe Harris, Mitch Jaffe, Herb Millman, and Bessie Pine for reviewing and commenting on early drafts of this paper.

The second section presents various research approaches and their advantages for communal service.

ALLOCATING LIMITED RESOURCES – THE CASE FOR RESEARCH

In the Jewish communal field there are never enough financial resources to meet the need. The demand for service is continually increasing, and the supply of funds cannot keep pace. Under these circumstances, hard decision making must take place. Community leaders looking at the "big" picture must decide which agencies should be funded and to what extent. For example, should more beds be added to the Jewish home versus an increase in day care services at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) for children of working parents? Or, should a vocational service provide transportation for handicapped adults or would these dollars be better spent on a training program for single mothers trying to re-enter the job market?

Tough decisions are required. One weighs the costs and benefits of every program against all other competing possibilities. Priority setting is difficult and frustrating, and because there is never enough money available for all of the programs that deserve funding, some community needs will have to be put off.

Given this context, how can one justify placing research onto the agenda of the Jewish communal field? The answer can only be found in the concept of deferred service whereby decision makers make a conscious choice to put off some current needs for what they perceive to be a more important future goal. In essence, denying dollars today for an undeniably important and necessary service can only be justified under the assumption that the investment of these dollars elsewhere will lead to substantially greater levels of service tomorrow.

The general model of deferred service is as follows. An agency devotes a percentage of its operating budget in year one toward a research study. The results of the study provide for increased effectiveness/efficiency. This added benefit is then applied in years two, three, four, and so on. This is a sensible approach to maximizing service delivery in the long run as any cost-benefit analysis will show.

Consider these two specific examples of deferred service.

Depression in the elderly: In a collaboration between the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Philadelphia and the Florence G. Heller-JWB Research Center, a study was conducted that showed that depressed seniors could be readily identified using a simple series of questions regarding their attitudes toward the future. Providing social work counseling to this identified group resulted in a significantly better outlook on life within a 6-month time frame. Targeting these services toward those most in need has allowed for a significant increase in staff resources.

Services to single-parent families: In a collaboration between the Northern Queens YM-YWHA in New York City and the Florence G. Heller-JWB Research Center, an evaluation study was conducted of their Single-Parent Center. Essentially, the Y provided a full range of services to these families, including recreation, support groups, family counseling, legal advice, and vocational counseling in cooperation with the local Jewish Vocational Service. The results of the study helped identify the strengths and weaknesses in the current program in order to deliver these needed services more efficiently and effectively.

These studies were not cost free; in both cases the research was done at the expense of other important services. Funding for the depression study could have paid the salary of one additional full-time senior adult worker for one year ($25,000); funding for the single-parent study could have provided day camp fees for 50 children from single-parent homes for the full summer ($50,000). In each case, a decision was made to conduct the research in lieu of the worthy choices; current services were deferred for a potentially greater benefit.

There is a formal methodology called *decision analysis* that can be helpful in making these difficult choices. Basically, decision analysis is an approach that weighs expected costs against the potential benefits. Anticipated costs can generally be estimated fairly accurately; potential benefits are much more difficult to assess. In the first place, a benefit can be hard to quantify and there is no guarantee that a study will be successful. The benefit side of the equation requires a bit of faith.

Another example is instructive here.

> In a collaborative effort with the JCCs of Chicago, the Florence G. Heller-JWB Research Center conducted a survey of over 600 teenagers throughout North America to determine the degree of both sexual knowledge and activity of Jewish teens. The cost of the study was $40,000.
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> The findings of the study were expected to result in new programs in JCCs that would reduce some of the tensions teens feel in this most sensitive area. These new programs would be expected to help some teens feel more comfortable in "just saying no"; other sexually active teens would start to practice better birth control. In general, these programs would result in teens following safer sexual practices.
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> The potential benefits of these programs are hard to assess. What price should we place on more responsible sexual behavior in teens, including the possibility of fewer unwanted pregnancies, a decrease in the incidence of veneral disease, and the chance that one or more Jewish teens will avoid contracting AIDS? It is possible to derive a dollar estimate for these potential benefits by considering such factors as the number of hospital days saved. However, estimating these costs is difficult at best. For the sake of our illustration we will assign an arbitrary value of $1,000,000.
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> Decision analysis requires one further element for the equation—the likelihood of the study resulting in the benefit. Clearly, this is not 100%; not every study is successful. It is also not 0% because not every study fails. The exact probability of success is unknown, but it is possible to approximate based on other similar research efforts. For our example, a very conservative 5% probability of success is used.
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> All the necessary elements for deciding whether or not to conduct the study of adolescent sexuality are now available. The relevant numbers are as follows:
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> 1. Cost of study—$40,000
> 2. Potential benefit—$1,000,000
> 3. Probability of success—5%
> 4. Expected benefit = benefit times probability = $50,000 ($1,000,000 x .05)
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> Decision: Expected benefit of $50,000 is greater than cost of $40,000; therefore, conduct the study.

One last point should be stressed in using this deferred service framework in determining the role of research in Jewish communal service. Potential benefits can be great for relatively limited costs. This is true because of two inherent aspects of the research study. First, the results are not time limited; a successful program can be successful year in and year out. Second, the results are not agency dependent. A successful program in Canada may be transferable to Argentina, France, Israel, the world. The enormous deferred service potential of a successful research program is what makes the challenge of carrying out these studies worth the out-of-pocket expenditure from operational budgets.

RESEARCH IN THE JEWISH COMMUNAL FIELD—DEFINITION AND MODELS

The majority of people usually think of research in the context of a structured study involving the gathering of new information, most typically under controlled conditions. These studies are often expensive, time-consuming affairs that frequently do not provide useful or applicable results. Under this framework, it is understandable why research efforts often receive short shrift from practitioners who are actively playing important roles in the lives of their clientele. However, this framework is too limit-

ing; there is no reason for research to be so narrowly defined. A broader conceptualization would help show practitioners how the basic research methodology is important for their practice.

Webster's provides the following working definition of research, which suggests its wide scope: "1. Careful or diligent search. 2. Studious inquiry or examination; experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts; revision of accepted theory or laws in the light of new facts. 3. The collecting of information about a particular subject."

The problem area is in the second definition where "studious inquiry" is expanded to include the notion of "experimentation, discovery, and revision of accepted theory." It is this expansion that most people consider as they view Research with a capital "R," and it is this "capital R" research that is put in conflict with "capital P Practice."

One short example illustrates this point. As the Jewish population ages, the Jewish communal field has a clear interest in helping patients with Alzheimer's disease and their families. At the same time, the field would not be at all interested in conducting studies on the physiology of this disease, regardless of the potential benefits. Nor would it be inclined to spend large sums on the psychological effects of this condition on the patients and their families; as practitioners we are most interested in learning about practical methods for working with this population and helping them cope with the day-to-day issues. The root causes and the overall sociological and psychological factors may be of utmost interest, but Jewish communal agencies are not the appropriate instruments for their discovery and delineation.

The other two parts of Webster's definition of research do not present the same problem for the Jewish communal field. The issue, therefore, becomes how to conduct these "careful and diligent" searches and how to "collect information about a particular subject" without being unduly intrusive into our primary mandate—the delivery of service. There are three aspects of research that easily fit this model while allowing for an efficient and effective service component: program evaluation, secondary data analysis, and literature review.

Program Evaluation

A great deal of lip service is typically given to the need for consistent program evaluation. It is viewed as both a benefit to the program managers as they revise their offerings and for the agency administrators as they report on their constructive use of funds to the board of directors. Unfortunately, most in-house program evaluations are subjective in nature and consist of reports on attendance at a function and the perceived attitudes of participants. There is little in the way of a more formal evaluation entailing the collection of any objective data.

A more appropriate model for program evaluation would include the following:

- A statement of the objectives of the program
- A set of observable measures that are associated with the objectives
- A consistent procedure for attaining these measurements
- An appropriate process for data analysis
- A written report outlining all of the above that allows for open discussion among all interested parties and that also facilitates program replication using suggested revisions as recommended

As an example of this model, consider the Jewish day camp.

> The Florence G. Heller-JWB Research Center in collaboration with six JCC day camps throughout North America conducted a study of the Jewish day camp as an informal educational setting. In essence, each day camp chose an area of Jewish content as its theme for the summer for its 9-year-old campers. For example, the day camp in New Orleans focused on Life on the Kibbutz, and the camp in St. Paul Minnesota con-

sidered the Covenant with a special focus on the story of Noah.

The Research Center developed a single, combined multiple-choice test based on the stated objectives of the various programs. This was administered on a pretest/posttest basis to measure the increase in cognitive knowledge for each child as a result of his or her summer experience. A unique feature of this design was that the use of the same instrument for each camp allowed for different camps to act as control groups for each other, e.g., St. Paul versus the other camps on the Covenant subtest.

The data analysis showed these programs to be highly successful. In every instance the campers exhibited greater gains in their own content area than campers in the other, control camps. For example, the St. Paul campers scored higher on the Covenant subtest than the New Orleans campers, whereas the New Orleans campers scored higher on the Life on the Kibbutz subtest than the St. Paul campers. This study provided strong support for the day camp as an effective mechanism for informal Jewish education.

Two points should be noted about this example. First, there was a clear expectation that if children are exposed to specific content during a summer experience they will tend to learn some of that content. In fact, the study is entitled "Confirming an Assumption." Second, although the study may have been nothing more than confirmatory, it still provided a significant tool for the camps to use in recruiting new campers for the following season and to enhance their presentations to central funding sources about their effectiveness in imparting Jewish knowledge to young children.

One final factor deserves consideration. The Research Center conducted this study with the camps; the agencies did not do it on their own. The Research Center's mission as stated in its name is to provide research and is staffed and funded accordingly. Could the camps have undertaken this project independently? The costs and procedures for such a study are very modest. Basically, a test needs to be developed and administered, and the data need to be analyzed. For this small-scale program evaluation, the test does not need to be a perfect instrument with high reliability and validity. The local Board of Jewish Education could supply an appropriate instrument, and data could be analyzed easily on a personal computer. The benefits of such a study can go beyond its apparent worth as the camp committee and administration will announce the efficacy of the day camp far and wide.

Secondary Data Analysis

Every agency generally collects information regarding its clientele, funding sources, expenditures, program participation, and the like. These data are used for reports to the board and to central funding agencies, such as the United Way and local Jewish federation. As a rule, these records are typically viewed as a necessary evil and are referred to under the negative rubric as "paperwork."

Rarely are these already available records viewed as a potential storehouse for research. With minimal effort it is generally possible to answer such basic questions as "how many" and "how often" and to compare results to previous years and or to other similar agencies.

One simple example suffices in this context. Two years ago, on a visit to the JCCs of Greater Boston I was in a discussion regarding the use of an excellent computer package called the Joshua system, which was developed specifically for JCC and federation record keeping. At the same time, I was aware of a recent demographic study of the Boston Jewish population. I therefore posed the following questions as a test of the system: "How many Jewish teens are members of the Center and what percentage does this represent of all Jewish teens in the Boston area?"

Within 5 minutes we had our answers; 679 teens were members out of approximately 10,600 in greater Boston, or 6.4%.

This number in and of itself was not very useful. However, there could be great utility in comparing this percentage with other metropolitan cities and in tracking this number yearly to assess the effects of various marketing approaches to teens. It can easily be seen from this example that the costs involved in using available records can be negligible.

Literature Review

The third appropriate approach to research for the Jewish communal field is one that is too often overlooked. It is rare that practitioners spend any time in the library at the onset of a new program or project. Library work is something one last did in school for his or her thesis; a "careful and diligent search" is somehow viewed as unbecoming to an already established professional. For some unknown reason there are people who seem to feel that it is not entirely kosher to rely on other people's already published work.

As a case in point, consider the Alzheimer's example referred to earlier. A cursory search of the social work and gerontological journals of the last 2 years shows at least a dozen articles with Alzheimer's in the title, many of them reporting on the effectiveness of an intervention program. A day in the library could help in the development of new programs while avoiding mistakes that others have already made. It is a clear waste of time and effort to redo work that has already been done. Take the wheel someone else invented and start to roll with it.

Available Resources

There is one final point to be made concerning the role of research in the Jewish communal field. The last two sections have dealt with already available material, whether in the form of agency records or published literature. Each of these should be viewed as a resource. There is also one other major resource that may sometimes be overlooked; that is, the large group of professional colleagues who are all doing the same kind of work for the same reasons, people dedicated to serving the Jewish community.

These people resources come in at least two varieties: institutional and personal. Institutional resources are the professionals whose defined jobs are to be expert consultants. These include professionals in the major umbrella service agencies, such as the Jewish Community Centers Association for the North American Center movement, Council of Jewish Federations for the federations in the United States and Canada, and the Jewish Educational Service of North America for Jewish educational bureaus. Other institutional resources would include universities, schools of social work, and schools of Jewish communal service. Often, these institutional colleagues are willing to provide short-term consultation as a professional courtesy.

Taking advantage of personal resources requires one further step: looking to knowledgeable friends, acquaintances, and coworkers for information and advice about a particular subject. One estimate suggests that every Jewish communal worker in the world is within five telephone calls of every other worker regardless of level and status—someone always knows someone who knows someone. This merely re-emphasizes the importance of attendance at professional meetings and conferences and maintaining an up-to-date phone index.

CONCLUSION

This article is based on two assumptions that underpin our work. The first is that the primary and clear goal of the Jewish communal field is service to the Jewish community. The second assumption requires a compound sentence; there is never enough money available to meet the community's needs, and nothing is free. These

assumptions force us to assign priorities carefully to our work with our constant objective of maximizing our services.

The field of Jewish communal service has a long history of providing quality services to the Jewish communities throughout the world. Research, whether done in the chemistry laboratory or in the social arena, is of no value in and of itself. It is only when such research is applied in specific cases for constructive use, comparison, and evaluation that it is valuable. The intent of this article is to open a discussion of the proper role that research can play in helping to serve the Jewish communal world.