At the schools in our study, almost half of all Jewish students (45 percent) had taken at least one Jewish studies course by the time they were seniors.

If you were walking on a college campus 40 years ago and stopped to ask for directions to the Jewish Studies Department, you would have been greeted with a blank stare. A knowledgeable student might have told you that, aside from some Hebraist scholar in the Classics Department, no such entity existed, although he might have kindly steered you toward the yeshiva downtown. As Brandeis University Professor Emeritus Leon Jick noted in a recent lecture on the history of Jewish studies, "The entry of Jews in American universities as students was early, massive and determined. The entry of Jewish subject matter was late, fragmentary and timid." While Jews saw the secular university as a ticket to economic and social success in America, they saw Jewish learning as the province of seminaries, yeshivot, and Hebrew teachers colleges.

The landscape today is vastly different. The past few decades have seen a flourishing of Jewish studies.Boosted by the push for ethnic studies in the 1960s and 1970s, Jewish studies programs have taken root and grown on campuses across the country. Schools are happy to have these programs, which — in distinction from Jewish clubs and organizations on campus — directly serve a university’s academic goals. Jewish studies programs round out a university’s course offerings, they serve large numbers of students, and they help students fulfill their course requirements. On many campuses, Jewish studies programs offer dozens of courses a year that serve hundreds of students. While Hillel organizations and clubs are recognizable from a generation ago, the growth in Jewish studies represents a stunningly dramatic change on campus.

The Promise
Our recent research of Jewish life on college campuses (see sidebar) documented the significant numbers of Jewish students taking one or more Jewish studies courses during their undergraduate careers. At the schools in our study, almost half of all Jewish students (45 percent) had taken at least one Jewish studies course by the time they were seniors.

Once students cross the threshold into a Jewish studies program, there is a good likelihood that they will take a second or even a third course. Indeed, half of those who delve into Jewish studies follow this pattern.

Jewish studies courses manage to reach students who are otherwise untouched by formal Jewish life on campus. In our analysis we looked at three types of students: the “unengaged,” who have no involvement in Hillel or other Jewish-affiliated clubs; the “engaged,” who have at least some involvement, even if only minimal; and Jewish student “leaders.” We found that approximately one out of four...
Why do students who are otherwise not engaged by Jewish life find their way into Jewish studies courses? The principal answer turns out to be pragmatic — to fulfill course requirements. Schools today often require students to take at least one course concerned with women, minority groups or non-Western cultures. Jewish studies courses — even for Jewish students — fulfill this requirement. Moreover, Jewish studies programs are, by nature, interdisciplinary, encompassing history, foreign languages, art, philosophy and even politics and sociology. Credits from a Jewish studies course, therefore, may count toward other undergraduate requirements. Enrollments are particularly high in courses that not only fulfill requirements but also have a campus-wide reputation for their exciting content and teaching.

Table 1: Engagement in Jewish Organizations and in Jewish Studies Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to Formal Jewish Organizations</th>
<th>Percent Taking a Jewish Studies Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unengaged</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"unengaged" students have taken at least one course on a Jewish subject (Table 1).

It is true that the stronger a student's Jewish upbringing, the more likely s/he is to take a Jewish studies course. Nonetheless, a fourth of those who were raised in non-Jewish or mixed households, of those who had minimal Jewish education growing up, and of those who consider themselves secular Jews find their way into these courses.

Why do students who are otherwise not engaged by Jewish life find their way into Jewish studies courses? The principal answer turns out to be pragmatic — to fulfill course requirements. Schools today often require students to take at least one course concerned with women, minority groups or non-Western cultures. Jewish studies courses — even for Jewish students — fulfill this requirement. Moreover, Jewish studies programs are, by nature, interdisciplinary, encompassing history, foreign languages, art, philosophy and even politics and sociology. Credits from a Jewish studies course, therefore, may count toward other undergraduate requirements. Enrollments are particularly high in courses that not only fulfill requirements but also have a campus-wide reputation for their exciting content and teaching.

Challenge

In terms of identity exploration and development, the academic purpose of the courses cuts two ways. On the one hand, it is precisely the academic nature of the course and its perceived seriousness and objectivity that create the safe environment for self-exploration. In the process of meeting requirements and learning to be critical thinkers, students may also learn something about themselves. On the other hand, Jewish studies — unlike Jewish educational programs at Hillel — cannot and do not function as identity-building groups.

Indeed, Jewish studies programs are largely unconcerned with a student's Jewish identity, religious beliefs or Jewish observance. Rather, courses are offered because of their intellectual value and their contribution to the university's mission. Faculty are selected for their scholarly excellence — not for their own Jewish practices or their ability to be role models to students on a Jewish journey. At one elite institution, a key faculty member told us that the Jewish studies program refuses to be in the service of Jewish identity. "Our function is as critical scholars or teachers," he said. For faculty, Jewish studies is a matter of the head, not the heart.

Bottom Line

That said, what happens to students who take these courses? Our data show that compared with their Jewish peers who do not take such courses, those who take Jewish studies courses have significantly higher levels of Judaic knowledge; they place significantly higher weight on Jewish values; and they report a significantly greater connection to the Jewish people, a greater pride in being Jewish, and a greater importance of Judaism in their lives. It is difficult to know how much of their Jewish knowledge, values and sentiments can be attributed to college coursework or whether these derive from other experiences (during or prior to college), but it is clear that there is a relationship.

The bottom line is that Jewish studies won't create Jews. For Jewish students with limited Judaic knowledge, it can serve to correct and augment childhood learning. It can enhance Jewish literacy and thus, indirectly, lower barriers to later participation in other Jewish activities. But it cannot create a sense of Jewish peoplehood or a love of Torah or a sense of obligation to mitzvot. For students to achieve both intellectual and emotional growth as Jews, coordination is needed between formal and informal education, between faculty and Hillel professionals, and between the classroom and extracurricular clubs. The full potential of Jewish learning during the college years will happen only when these elements work together and the divide is bridged between knowledge building and identity building.

* Many years ago, Jewish college students were forced to compete with one another for quota-limited slots at institutions of higher learning. Today, Jewish students are unfamiliar with any such discrimination. Their assimilation into the American college scene is complete. This current reality has engendered a new problem: How to support Jewish students in the development and expression of their ethnic-religious identity. Recent interventions — from reshaped and reinvigorated Hillel chapters to the Birthright Israel program — have served to reach out and to engage more Jewish students in Jewish life.

To understand the nature of Jewish identity among young adults, researchers from Brandeis University have been studying Jewish life on the college campus. As part of this effort, we studied 20 colleges and universities with significant Jewish populations. Over 700 students and professionals (faculty, administrators, Hillel staff) were interviewed during site visits. Surveys were conducted with both Jewish and non-Jewish students. Survey respondents included over 2,000 Jewish undergraduates and an equal number of non-Jewish students.

Data from the study shed light on both the promise and the challenge of Jewish life on campus. What is clear is that the experiences of Jewish students are not monolithic, even at a single campus. Despite a plethora of programs, most young Jews are untouched by formal Jewish life during their college years. The results of the study will be available in 2005.

— AMY L. SALES and LEONARD Saxe