Limmud NY: An Experiment in Jewish Life and Learning

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** ................................................................. 3

**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................. 4
- A GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION .................................................. 4
- EMPOWERING JEWISH LIVES ........................................................................ 5
- THE PROGRAM .............................................................................. 7

**THE PEOPLE WHO CAME** .......................................................... 9
- DEMOGRAPHICS ........................................................................ 9
- JEWISH INVOLVEMENT .................................................................. 12
- ATTRACTING PEOPLE TO LIMMUD NY ........................................... 18

**THE EXPERIENCE OF LIMMUD NY** ........................................... 19
- LEARNING ................................................................................. 20
- SPIRITUALITY ........................................................................... 26
- SOCIAL ACTION ........................................................................ 27
- COMMUNITY ............................................................................. 27
- RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY .............................................................. 30
- CELEBRATION .......................................................................... 32

**THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT HAPPEN** .................................... 33
- PLANNERS ............................................................................... 33
- PRESENTERS ............................................................................ 37

**CHANGE** ................................................................................... 40

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS** ............................. 43
- DIVERSITY .............................................................................. 43
- LEARNING ............................................................................... 44
- COMMUNITY ............................................................................ 45
- VOLUNTEERISM ...................................................................... 46
- OTHER .................................................................................... 46
- NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH .................................................... 47

**APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY** ................................................ 49

**APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY** .......................................................... 50
Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of Limmud NY Attendees
Figure 2: Types of Schools Attended Four Years or More
Figure 3: Denominational Affiliation of Limmud NY Attendees
Figure 4: Membership and Activity in Jewish Organizations
Figure 5: Jewish Activities
Figure 6: Membership in Synagogues or Congregations
Figure 7: How Participants Learned About Limmud NY
Figure 8: Overall, did you find Limmud NY
Figure 9: To what extent did you have conversations stimulated by the sessions you attended?
Figure 10: Presenters were the same people I see all the time
Figure 11: There were too many good sessions to choose from
Figure 12: To what extent did you find sessions geared to your learning style?
Figure 13: To what extent did Limmud NY meet your needs and interests?
Figure 14: Community: To what extent did the following aspects of Limmud NY contribute to your decision to attend?
Figure 15: Community: Did you come to Limmud with
Figure 16: Diversity: How much do you agree or disagree
Figure 17: Experiences of Limmud NY Planners
Figure 18: How likely are you to be involved in planning Limmud NY next year?
Figure 19: Presenters and Performers: To what extent

Table 1: Age
Table 2: Gender
Table 3: Marital Status of Adults Over 21
Table 4: Memberships
Table 5: Denominational Affiliation of Jewish Professionals and Non-Professionals
Table 6: Amount of Time Volunteering: Prior to and During Limmud NY
Table 7: Number of Sessions Conducted by Presenters/Performers
Table A1: Survey Response Rates
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Limmud NY 2005 was a highly successful program of Jewish learning and activity. It attracted a Jewishly diverse group of participants, eager to learn and celebrate Jewish living. Most came away excited and enthusiastic with many volunteering to help plan next year’s event. They delighted in the variety of learning opportunities and enjoyed the friendly, celebratory atmosphere of the event.

Registration for Limmud exceeded planning goals and most participants eagerly anticipate returning next year. But Limmud was less successful in reflecting the geographic distribution of New York’s Jewish community or attracting the less affiliated or involved Jews. The program’s most effective marketing tool was word of mouth. People came because they knew people who were involved in the planning or they heard about it from friends. This method of dissemination is probably one reason that Limmud attracted so many residents of the Upper West Side. Participants were also, for the most part, affiliated with Jewish organizations and products of rich Jewish education. Because the planners themselves were highly engaged in the Jewish community, participants reflect that level of involvement. They also reflect the religious heterogeneity of the planning group. The plurality of Limmud participants were Conservative or “Conservadox” Jews, but many came from Reform or Orthodox communities and some identified themselves as secular or “Just Jewish.” Limmud NY drew from a wide age range and created a truly multigenerational community.

Participants came because they wanted to learn and they wanted to have a good time with people like themselves. They particularly enjoyed the wide array of topics and presenters and the opportunity to be part of an educational experience in which the lines between learners and students were constantly in flux. Limmud NY created a non-hierarchical learning environment that most participants found comfortable. They were able to find topics of interest, presenters of note, and learning styles to fit their needs. Given the range of choices, it was inevitable that some participants would choose programs that they would enjoy less or presenters whose style or positions made them uncomfortable. And, given the high level of Jewish education people came in with, it is not surprising that some felt they were not challenged by the learning. Regardless, most people felt they had a productive and enjoyable learning experience.

Most participants came with friends or knew people from other places, and they appreciated four days of total immersion in a Jewish community. They enjoyed having meals together, sitting and talking between sessions, and feeling part of a community of learners. People who came without previous associations with other participants had more trouble feeling part of the group. Though most celebrated the Jewish society they were part of, some felt left out.

Over a hundred Limmud NY participants have already volunteered to help plan Limmud NY 2006. Some of these were planners of last year’s event, but most are not. The volunteer
experience was energizing and rewarding for many, but was not entirely successful for others. Some of the planners found the amount of time and effort required of them overwhelming. Some complained that the work was inequitably distributed. Nonetheless, most are returning to help organize Limmud NY 2006. Limmud NY founders hope that the volunteer base, those people who are “doing” Limmud all year round and developing leadership skills for the Jewish community, will continue to expand. The challenge for Limmud NY’s leadership is to bring in more volunteers from communities beyond the Upper West Side, since a more a geographically diverse base of volunteers should be able to attract a more diverse group of participants.

Some attendees had criticisms of Limmud NY, but more had praise. Most are energized by their experience and plan to come back bringing friends and family members with them. In this way, Limmud should be able to move, year by year, from strength to strength, building a broader and more committed base to expand its work in the New York area while disseminating its successes to other parts of the country.

INTRODUCTION

“Limmud is a new model for the American Jewish community. It isn’t just the individual sessions, it’s being in that bubble for three days which puts you in a very different Jewish community than the normal Jewish environment in New York City. And the fact that it’s created by your peer group – that’s about empowerment and engagement – rare in American Jewish life. [And the volunteers] get up and say ‘Wow! I really made this possible!’ That’s a very Jewish value and it’s actually worth the time and expense to create that experience.”

A Grassroots Organization

Limmud NY held its first annual gathering of Jewish learning and culture on Martin Luther King Weekend, January 14-17, 2005 at the Hudson Valley Resort in the heart of the Catskill Mountains. Over 600 people from a broad spectrum of Jewish backgrounds immersed themselves in richly diverse programming, including text study, prayer, poetry, discussion of philosophy and Israeli politics, performance, and art. Limmud NY was an idea born out of Limmud UK which was itself conceived out of the idea of CAJE, then known as the Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education. The idea behind CAJE was that any Jewish educator could come, present, and be part of a dialogue of on-going learning. In 1980, several educators from the UK, after attending CAJE, initiated the first Limmud UK. That first ‘conference’ attracted 80 Jewish educators. The number grew to over 300 by the early 1990s. By 1995, Limmud UK was expanding rapidly. Over 700 people attended, and over 500 sessions were offered. The program quickly opened up to the entire Jewish community. In 2004, Limmud UK attracted almost 3,000 people from various Jewish denominational, non-denominational, or post-denominational affiliations to a program offering over 700 sessions. Participants represented almost 1% of the entire Jewish population of the UK. A Limmud NY Steering Committee member explained the success of Limmud UK:
“The reason Limmud UK is successful is because it is preeminently a post-modern institution. British Judaism is quite old-fashioned. … But at Limmud UK there are 25 different choices in each time-slot and several hundred choices over several days. It’s like moving from a choice of one or two television channels to 500. Limmud gives you choice. Yet it’s all Jewish and it’s all learning broadly construed. That’s ultimately the post-modern move. Post modernism simultaneously embraces modernism and pre-modernism, to that extent Limmud lets people reengage with ancient Jewish tradition but it also lets them do it in a fairly contemporary way. That’s really significant.”

Inspired by Limmud UK and supported by UJA-Federation of NY through a grant from the Picower Foundation, a group of New York Jewish leaders\(^1\) undertook to plan a Limmud for the Greater New York City Area. With one paid director, Abigail Dauber, and two paid part-time interns, over 80 volunteers contributed up to 20 hours per week of their time to create a four-day program of over 200 sessions led by more than 100 presenters and/or performers. Over 600 people attended the event, and many had to be turned away due to space limitations. The entire program was planned by volunteers. None of the presenters was paid. Some were invited to present and others offered to present. On-site, with the exception of the caterer, the program was run entirely by volunteers.

**Empowering Jewish Lives**

Limmud NY is based on the assumption that many established Jewish institutions and traditional ways of participating in Jewish life have little meaning for many of today’s Jews. In England, Limmud UK provided an opportunity for such Jews to find Jewish learning, community, and practice in an alternative form and setting yet rooted in Jewish tradition. Recent literature on Jewish identity in America (Cohen & Eisen 2000; Horowitz 2000) underlines the importance of recognizing new ways in which Jews situate themselves in their religious lives. Pursuing “reflexive spirituality” (Roof, 1999), Jews today look to the “sovereign self” (Cohen & Eisen, 2000) rather than communal norms both to define themselves as Jews and to determine the path of their Jewish development.

The educational theory underlying Limmud is to enable movement along such a path (or journey) of Jewish identity formation in a non-hierarchical format. Limmud’s flat structure, with volunteers for planning, facilitating, teaching, and performing, is meant to create a safe environment in which the lines between teacher and student blur, and learners feel empowered and accepted (Schuster, 2003).

Limmud NY 2005 was designed to merge the cognitive and affective aspects of adult Jewish education. It provided talks, opportunities for discussion, and the sharing of textual analysis. But it also sought to provide a total Jewish experience (somewhat like the experience of being in Israel) for four days – where Jews could experience volunteerism, live, eat, and play Jewishly in order to develop the “significant positive relationships,

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\(^1\) Karen Radkowsky, Jeffrey Schwarz, Nigel Savage, Leon Morris, Elie Kaunfer, and Marco Veissid.
experiences, or events” that Horowitz’s work suggests play an important role in identity formation (Horowitz 2000).

The volunteer process of planning and running Limmud NY is crucial to its success and its impact on participants. As Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein explain in their book Better Together (2003), there has been an erosion of community networks in the United States over the past three decades. People thrive best through active participation in building their own communities, but motivation and opportunities for this type of engagement have decreased with the continued fragmentation of American society (Putnam, 2003). Furthermore, as the United Way report on Building Relationships with Generations X and Y explains, Generation X members (those born between 1965 and 1976) are often considered “fiercely independent, skeptical, [with] no sense of corporate loyalty, and distrustful of authority.” Community leaders see this age group (30-40 year olds) as less interested in philanthropy and volunteerism. The report explains:

“Generation X does engage in philanthropic activity but they have a strong demand that they get something out of the experience. To this generation, this could involve the immediate gratification of mentoring, the adventure of trekking through Africa, or a full accounting of the outcomes of their efforts. Indeed, one of the things X-ers want to ‘get out’ of philanthropy is a feeling of having an impact.” (United Way of America, 2005)

Cohen and Eisen found that today’s Jews, compared to their parents, feel less of a sense of connection to the organized Jewish community (Cohen & Eisen, 2000). In their drive for personally meaningful experiences, they are much like their peers described in the United Way report, but traditional Jewish institutions do not always offer opportunities that provide immediate gratification or the sense of having an impact. Jewish organizations are run by professionals, with lay leadership often determined more by financial status than ability to lead (Tobin 2001). Thus, Jews in their twenties and thirties often find it difficult, or at least unappealing, to become involved in organized Jewish life. Limmud NY’s model, however, provides a new and different kind of opportunity, one in which volunteers from various age groups and backgrounds are leading the way, planning every detail of the event, and in the process building their own community.

Limmud NY, therefore, seeks to empower Jews as learners, as volunteers, and as potential leaders in the Jewish community. As learners, they should be enabled to find meaning in Jewish texts and ritual. At the same time, they are offered the opportunity to explore topics of more general interest (art, music, environmentalism and social issues) through Jewish lenses. In both ways, Limmud participants should be able to take the learning they experience over the four days and be inspired to continue it on their own. Volunteer organizers should be able to find meaning in their experience. Through building community, planning events, negotiating policy, and developing strategies for getting the work done with all volunteer labor, they should gain a sense of accomplishment as well as a sense of empowerment to continue the work. If Limmud NY is successful in both these ways, participants will have the desire and the ability to advance Jewish life and learning for themselves and for the New York Jewish community.
The Program

Limmud NY offered over 200 programs for participants to choose from in 22 different time slots. The program book organized the sessions by time slots, presenter/performer, and by ‘track.’ There were fourteen tracks:

- Arts/Culture
- Community
- Education
- Family
- History
- How to…
- High School recommended
- Israel
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Music
- Philosophy
- Social Issues
- Spirituality
- Torah Lishmah

Individual sessions were listed under multiple tracks. Programs for children, scheduled concurrently with adult programming, were conducted mainly by students who received scholarships to cover part of their registration.

The first sessions were scheduled to begin early Friday afternoon. Due to snowy road conditions, people arrived late and these sessions had to be pushed back. Throughout Limmud, sessions had to be rescheduled and relocated. Some of the meeting rooms were too large for their sessions while others were too small.

*Kashrut* was observed in all public places in the Hotel. Other than Friday night dinner, all meals were on a drop-in basis between or during sessions. It was impossible to attend all sessions and still have time to eat three meals a day, but light snacks (fruit, cookies, tea, coffee, and water) were always available in the hotel lobby.

Buses to Limmud left New York City in order to allow participants to arrive before Shabbat. In this, as in the observance of *kashrut*, Limmud adhered to Orthodox standards. The standard in individual sessions, however, varied. Some adhered to Orthodox standards but others did not. Participants had their choice of services with or without musical instruments or a *mehitzah*, and on Friday night it was possible to attend a showing of the film ‘The Chosen,’ or to participate in an instrumental ‘Jam session.’ Other choices on

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2 A glossary of Hebrew words used in this report is provided in Appendix B.
Limmud NY: AN Experiment in Jewish Life and Learning

Friday night included a discussion of ‘Enhancing Mitzvah Night: Talking to Your Partner About Sex’ and a session on ‘Sanctifying the Sabbath: The Mitzvah of Reciting Kiddush.’

The only community-wide programs involving all participants at the same time were the Opening Program and Shabbat dinner, text study and havdalah, a “Mega Event” on Sunday evening, and a closing program Monday afternoon. Other than that, participants were on their own to choose from different forms of worship services and as many as thirteen different simultaneous sessions.

This evaluation is based on pre- and post- surveys with participants, planners, and presenters, participant observation of the retreat by an evaluation team member, and in-depth interviews with 60 people following the event. This report presents the results of that data gathering. It is divided into five sections. The first, The People at Limmud, examines who came to the event and who made it happen. In particular, it describes the diversity of the participants, planners and presenters and what they brought to Limmud NY. The second part looks at the experience and how people felt about the event itself. The third focuses on planners and presenters, their experiences and reactions to the event. The fourth explores how people felt changed by their Limmud experience and their intentions for future involvement. The final section summarizes Limmud’s accomplishments and offers recommendations for the future.
THE PEOPLE WHO CAME

A health-care professional in her mid-thirties who came to Limmud NY from one of the outer boroughs emphatically states that she does not want to identify herself denominationally. That kind of conversation “is boring and tedious.” The participation of women, however, is non-negotiable to her.

She’s a member of a Conservative synagogue because it’s a nice synagogue and “it’s just my shul. I joined because I like being affiliated. …The shul is also three blocks from where I live, so it’s convenient. I go once a month. There were times I went twice a week. Some of it is a change in mood that I have no desire to go to shul. From an activity level, sometimes you’re into doing something and sometimes you’re not. If Judaism is like family and shul is like family, sometimes you’re just not interested.”

Despite her current lack of interest in shul attendance, she says *modeh ani* and kisses the mezuzah when she goes in and out of her house, which, she says, “is weird, but it’s like touching bases.” She takes the idea of *tzedakah* extremely seriously. To her it means justice and charity and kindness. She gives *tzedakah* on specific occasions, on *yahrzeits*, holidays, and after a funeral. She says, “the act of being connected to something that’s bigger than yourself is not only mandated but should be connected to specific times that need to be infused with some sense of *kedushah*, something that’s a little bit bigger.” She bakes *hamantaschen* every year, “because if you don’t bake them then Purim doesn’t come. If Purim doesn’t come, then Passover doesn’t come.” It’s important, she says, that Judaism gives rhythm to the year.

The organizers of Limmud NY hoped to attract an audience that was diverse demographically and in terms of Jewish backgrounds, practice, affiliation and attitudes. They sought participation from the five boroughs of NY as well as Westchester and Long Island. Scholarship funding was provided by the Schusterman Foundation specifically for the purpose of increasing attendance among high school and college students. Additional subsidies were available for Jewish educators. Organizers sought to create a program that would have wide appeal bringing people from disparate Jewish communities—or no Jewish community— together to learn from one another and expand Jewish living and learning as broadly as possible.

Demographics

Almost 800 people were registered for Limmud NY on January 10, 2005. Of those, 665 had paid their registration fee and were expected to attend. The others were waitlisted, and some had cancelled. The data on age, gender and zip code were taken from the registration for these 665 people. All other data in this report is from the surveys. Surveys were sent to
the 595 adults who attended. Responses were received from 465 on the first survey and 425 on the second. ³ (See Appendix A.)

**Age:** Limmud NY drew mainly adults beyond their college years who came without children. Over three-quarters of the attendees were adults over the age of 24. Only 21 high school students attended—a smaller proportion (3%) than organizers had hoped to attract. Fifty-five children between the ages of two and twelve attended and 61 who were college or graduate student age although not all of them were students (and not all students were under 25.) Eighty-four people (13%) labeled themselves as “students.”

**Table 1: Age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>under 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-12</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-79</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gender and Marital Status:** Almost two-thirds of the people who attended Limmud NY were female (Table 2). The sex ratio was even more skewed among young people. In the 13 to 24 age range, approximately three in four participants were female. Other Jewish educational institutions experience a similar disproportion of women in their programs (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, and Cohen., 2004).

**Table 2: Gender**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>13-24 year olds</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Particularly striking is the number of single adults who attended Limmud NY (Table 3). Only 51% of adults over the age of 21 were married or living with a partner. The other 49% were separated, divorced, widowed or never married. Although the survey did not ask specifically if they were hoping to meet partners or significant others, it did ask if they came to meet new people. Singles were twice as likely as those who were married or living

³ Not all tables add to 665 or 514 since some of the attendees did not answer all the questions on the registration, and survey respondents also skipped questions.
together to base their decision to attend Limmud NY on the opportunity to meet people (58% versus 27%).

Table 3: Marital Status of Adults Over 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Status</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living together</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only six respondents indicated that their spouse was not Jewish. Sixteen said their spouse or partner had not been raised Jewish, but half of them had conversion ceremonies at some stage of their lives.

National Origin: Limmud NY attracted very few participants from countries outside the U.S. British Jews attended either because they are currently living in the United States or because they presented or were involved in Limmud UK. Thirteen participants came from Israel. Of those who speak a language other than English at home (17%), most of those speak Hebrew. There are also small numbers who use Spanish, German, or Yiddish at home.

Geographic Distribution: A third of the participants came from the Upper West Side of New York and over half from Manhattan (Figure 1). It is possible that the latter represents an overestimate since some people gave their work addresses in the registration. People from outside the New York UJA-Federation catchment area represented 27% of the attendees. Of those, about 20% were presenters or performers. Some were students and others were people interested in learning more about Limmud NY in order to be able to replicate it in their own areas.
Jewish Involvement

**Education growing up:** Most Limmud NY participants came from rich Jewish backgrounds. Almost all Limmud NY survey respondents were raised Jewish (95%), although a few of those (10%) did not receive Jewish education growing up. And a third of all respondents had attended four or more years of day school or **yeshivah** (Figure 2).

Most Limmud NY participants had formal Jewish education beyond bar or bat mitzvah training. Almost 60% of all respondents had more than eight years of formal Jewish schooling of one type or another.

**Figure 2: Types of Schools Attended 4 Years or More**

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4 The table does not total to 100% because some Limmud attendees received less than four years of Jewish education and many had a variety of schooling, no one form for more than four years.
Survey respondents had also participated in Jewish summer camps and youth groups, and they had taken Jewish studies courses during college. The majority had attended or worked in a Jewish summer camp during their youth (66%). A similar percentage had taken college-level Jewish studies courses (63%). Over half had belonged to Jewish or Zionist youth groups (57%) in high school and 54% had been active in a Hillel or another Jewish organization at college.

Limmud NY participants’ engagement with Jewish learning is ongoing. In the pre-survey, 75% said they participated in Jewish educational activities once a month or more often. Some of the participants interviewed for this study had graduated from the Wexner program or were involved in Me’ah or Melton, and many had pursued studies in Israel.

**Denomination:** A third of respondents identified themselves as Conservative Jews (Figure 3). The “Other” category, which covers about one-fourth of the population, included Reconstructionists (7), Jewish Renewal Jews (9), “Conservadox” Jews (14) and those who said they were “traditional,” “halakhic” or “observant” but declined to label themselves as Orthodox (11). Some were Conservative or Traditional Egalitarian. Thirteen said they were a mixture of denominations or in-between and 7 consider themselves “post-denominational.” Among the more unique forms of self identification were “fruminist,” “flexidox,” “Conservative-earth-based,” “Bu-Jew,” “prefers no title,” and “we take the best from all.”

![Figure 3: Denominational Affiliation of Limmud NY Attendees (n=474)](image)

The program provided for standards of **halakhah** to make it as inclusive as possible for **halakhic** Jews. Some liberal Jews, in interviews and in their survey responses, expressed discomfort with that level of observance when it affected them. Liberal denominations were underrepresented. Since most of the “Other” were more traditional Jews straddling the fence between Conservative and Orthodox, Reform and “Just Jewish” participants were outnumbered three to one. And many of the “Just Jewish” may have been more traditional Jews in practice such as a gay man who declined to label himself as Orthodox but defined his practice as **halakhic**.
In interviews, participants were asked “what type of Jew are you?” rather than denominational affiliation. Although they were affiliated, and most were denominationally affiliated, denomination was rarely the first response to the question. “I’m the sort of Jew who’s still Jewing,” one man responded. A college student said he couldn’t respond to a question about his denomination. “I’m just Jewish,” he said. “I’m very observant. I like a lot of things about a lot of the different denominations.” One woman who belongs to a Modern Orthodox congregation told us she is observant but then corrected herself. Most Jews, she said, are observant in their own fashion.

The woman described in the beginning of this section described her way of being Jewish:

“I’d like to think there’s some way I interact in the world that’s informed by a Jewish outlook. By that I mean that I was always taught that in Judaism the questions were more important than the answers. And being in the process of struggle, whether with texts or in life, is fundamentally important. I don’t always do it, but I try to bring that attitude or that practice with me in life. To a greater or lesser degree, and this is more constant than any ritual practice I have. One of the most essential notions in Judaism is the idea that you should try to elevate things that you do … I’m not a *halakhic* person, believing that God really cares what I do. But the *mitzvot* give us some tools for elevating our mundane practices—whether those be interaction with other people or the food we eat—to a higher level of consciousness.”

**Institutional Affiliations:** Despite the reluctance on the part of many respondents to define themselves in standard denominational categories, most are affiliated. They are members of synagogues (77%) and/or *minyanim* or *havurot* (52%). Forty percent are members of both a synagogue and a *minyan* or *havurah* (Table 4). In some cases the *minyan* they attend is part of a larger congregation (for example, Minyan Me’at at Ansche Chesed). Other *minyanim* are independent organizations such as Hadar and Darchai Noam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synagogue</th>
<th>Minyan or Havurah</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest representation from any one synagogue (at least 8% of the people who gave their congregational affiliation) was from Congregation Bnai Jeshurun. Ansche Chesed, Hadar and Darchai Noam each had four or five percent. No other congregation or *minyan* had more than a few participants at Limmud NY.

Some Limmud participants were active in their Jewish communities (Figure 4). Most interviewees who were college students were active in Hillel and provided leadership either organizationally or for specific programs. For example, one had organized a Talmud
study group, and another organized a “transdenominational Jewish learning program.” Adults were board members for their children’s day schools, for synagogues, Jewish community centers, Jewish political and service organizations, and the UJA Federation of New York. One man spoke of having leadership roles on the boards of several organizations. He went to Limmud because a close friend was one of the organizers whom he knows in the context of several study groups and leadership positions.

**Figure 4: Membership and Activity in Jewish Organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Active</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synagogue</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minyan or Havurah</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCC</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Service Organization</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Political Group</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Israel:** Three-quarters of respondents said they had been to Israel at least three times, and a similar number said that caring about Israel is an important part of how they see themselves as Jews. Many of the people interviewed had prolonged stays filled with study and commitment. Regardless of age, denomination, or educational background, their ties to Israel are strong. “What goes on in Israel affects me deeply and directly,” a young man said. He feels “personally, spiritually, and professionally attached to Israel, and hopes to work or live there in the future.” Eight of the 59 people interviewed for this study had spent time studying at Pardes. Others had attended the Hartman Institute or the Mandel School. Several had attended Orthodox yeshivot. When one young woman talked about her experience in Israel, her voice filled with excitement. She spoke of learning Hebrew in Israel and how she came to love the land. Few of the interviewees were without questions on Israeli policy, but aside from one who had a personally negative experience there, all were unwavering in their commitment to Israel.

**Ways of Being Jewish:** Limmud NY participants are not only highly active in Jewish organizations, but also in making their lives Jewish (Figure 5). They attend worship services and share Shabbat meals with friends. Eighty percent say they often or always do
something to celebrate the Sabbath, and almost all fast on Yom Kippur, attend Passover *sederim*, and light candles on Hanukah.

![Figure 5: Jewish Activities: Over the past year, how often did you personally ...](image)

In interviews, however, it became clear that these questions did not adequately capture the extent of attendees’ Jewish practices or attachments. For example, they said they do more than attend services or Passover *sederim*; they lead them as well. And this is not merely a function of having professional status in the Jewish world. For example, a day school graduate came to Limmud NY with her husband and children. She is confident in her Hebrew and her knowledge of Judaism. She says she likes Passover, but she gets exasperated at “vapid” *sederim*. She makes certain that she and her husband host at least one of the *sederim* they go to each year to assure its high quality.

In contrast, another participant feels less comfortable with the Jewish education she received growing up. She attended Reform Sunday school until her bat mitzvah; then she and her family dropped out. She was not at all involved Jewishly until very recently when she joined Bnai Jeshurun at the urging of a friend. Although *sederim* with her grandparents engendered warm memories for her, her family’s Passover celebrations shifted around to different people’s homes after her grandparents died. When her father would lead it, she felt frustrated because he rushed through and skipped parts. So one year she got new *haggadot*—“more egalitarian and more story telling”—and her mother suggested that she lead the *seder*. Now she does it herself. She feels comfortable, not because she feels “so spiritual,” but because she can control the content and keep people involved.

**Jewish Professionals:** Because Limmud NY was initiated by people with close ties to the New York Jewish establishment, many of the attendees were part of that world. Of survey
respondents, 33% are employed in the Jewish sector. Some people came from the Federation, Jewish agencies, and academic programs. Although this may have contributed to a stronger intellectual climate, some felt the presence of so many professional Jews was not entirely positive. One survey respondent said, “I think there were too many professionals/staffers from the Jewish community. They all knew each other and I felt many were there to judge.”

Financial aid was made available to attract Jewish educators. Almost 100 respondents identified themselves in the pre-survey as Jewish educators and more than 30 of them were provided with stipends to help defray the costs of attending. Most of the educators volunteered as presenters or performers at Limmud NY.

“Jewish Professionals” were more apt than lay people to classify themselves as “Just Jewish” or “Other” (Table 5). Among people who said they were paid employees of Jewish organizations, almost half said they were “No denomination—Just Jewish” or categorized themselves in one of the “other” categories.

**Table 5: Denominational Affiliation of Jewish Professionals and Non-Professionals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Jewish Professionals</th>
<th>Non-Professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstructionist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Jewish</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Denomination -- Just Jewish</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05 ***p<.001

Compared to participants who are not employed by Jewish organizations, a significantly smaller percent of Jewish professionals were members of synagogues (Figure 6). There was, however, no difference in their membership numbers in havurot or minyanim or in their level of involvement in Jewish organizations.
Attracting People to Limmud NY

Limmud NY’s organizers originally hoped participants would represent a more typical distribution of Jewish New Yorkers—more unaffiliated Jews, Russian Jews, more people from the suburbs, and more families. Limmud NY’s Publicity and Recruitment Team sent out brochures to synagogues and JCCs, and they put ads in Jewish media outlets.
More than any other form of communication, Limmud NY participants heard about Limmud from friends and family members (Figure 7). Brochures appear to have been as effective as the Web in getting the word out, but neither attracted as many participants as hearing about it directly from a rabbi or Jewish professional.

Given that Limmud marketing accomplishments were based largely on personal efforts and connections, it is perhaps not surprising that the people they brought in looked like them in terms of age, gender, denominational identity, affiliations, and activities. The organizers and the steering committee brought their friends and associates, and people who shared their level of enthusiasm for the endeavor.

THE EXPERIENCE OF LIMMUD NY

A rabbinical student, who will be directing a program in Jewish education after graduation, came to Limmud NY to recruit faculty and scholars. “I attended the conference with a professional perspective to meet possible people to recruit … My goal was to start networking in a professional way, and I was very successful. But what I got out of the weekend was that for the first time in a long time I felt I did something for myself that was Jewish. Rabbinical school is about a job and routine, but this was for the self.”

Limmud NY presented participants with a wide range of choices and opportunities. Some participants raved about small, hands-on, group activities in visual or performing arts. Others were entranced by crowded listen-and-learn lectures. Some enjoyed panel discussions while others were passionate about yoga or storytelling. Because the range of choices was so great, some people inevitably made choices which they regretted, but most found something new and meaningful. In interviews, in the immediate feedback form, and in the post-survey five months later, participants continued to express enthusiasm for the event. A young New York professional came with his wife. He had been to Lishmah and had a good idea of what to expect. He said, “I was hoping to learn something about Judaism in general, whether it was text based or cultural or religious. I was confident that I would find things that would be of interest to me. And I did.”

Limmud NY respondents said they found the event friendly, educational, and fun. (See Figure 8.) Most also found it personally meaningful and intellectually challenging. Whatever their opinions of individual aspects of the program, the majority felt extremely positive about Limmud NY, and the majority (62%) say they are “very” or “extremely” likely to attend Limmud NY 2006. Since so many of them are scholars and leaders in the Jewish world, they also had criticisms and provided many suggestions for improving Limmud NY in the future.

This section of the report deals with reactions to six components of Limmud NY: education, spirituality, social action, community, diversity, and celebration.
Learning

In the comments section on the post-Limmud survey, one respondent wrote, “An intellectual experience!” For this individual, Limmud succeeded in providing the stimulation and satisfaction of a high quality educational program. Overall the reaction to the educational component of the experience was very positive. In the pre-survey, 73% said that the opportunity for an educational experience had contributed “a lot” to their decisions to attend Limmud NY. The presenters listed on the website and the promotion of Limmud NY through Lishmah and other venues of Jewish learning may have contributed to attracting people particularly interested in education. Limmud NY billed itself as an alternative kind of Jewish learning experience, but education was always front and center. Participants came for education, and most of them felt they enjoyed the experience while learning a great deal.

Level: Limmud NY attracted a Jewishly educated group of participants. Many feel secure in their level of Jewish learning, so it is not surprising that almost no one found the level of study to be too advanced. Indeed, 22% considered it too elementary for them. (That number was 32% among Jewish professionals and 18% among other participants.)

Some interviewees commented on the level of programming. One felt that Limmud NY was too oriented to people who already had knowledge of Judaism. He said he would not consider bringing less affiliated people because he was concerned they would feel excluded. His example was the havdalah service. “No one explained what it meant,” he
said. “People had to know to understand.” Another interviewee said she liked the fact that “classes were challenging and rigorously demanding.”

Just over half found themselves having conversations stimulated by the sessions they attended (Figure 9). In interviews we discovered that some people had trouble recalling specific sessions, but others remembered the exact texts studied and could repeat some of the most salient arguments. A number of interviewees (9 of 59) said the session on “Liberalism and Its Discontents,” which attracted a standing-room-only crowd, forced them to think about the feasibility of a liberal, *halakhic* Judaism. And they noted that conversations on the topic continued well after the session was over. The panel discussions,” Building Inclusive Community: Shabbat at Limmud NY,” “Standing at the Crossroads: Israel Today and Tomorrow,” and “Liberal Orthodoxy vs. Observant Conservatism.” also produced on-going conversations among attendees.

In the feedback form and in interviews, the sessions that were mentioned as most memorable and worthwhile were those conducted by “big-name” presenters. To some extent, this is not surprising. Since those were the names people recognized, those were the sessions that drew the largest crowds. Not all of them, however, were memorable or among the top favorites. Some of those with international reputations were among the least favorite. And in some cases a presenter or even a particular session was ranked by some participants as their most favorite and by others as their least favorite.

Fewer than 25% agreed that the presenters were the same people that they usually see in New York, (Figure 10) although those that did agree were vocal. “There were maybe 95% of the same teachers who usually talk on the Upper West Side,” one interviewee complained.
For the most part, people were impressed by the caliber of presenters and the sessions they attended. “I was really inspired by the energy/enthusiasm of the sessions and the presenters and the participants,” one respondent said. “In terms of learning, I felt like some of the panels/speakers/presenters were incredibly outstanding. … Just phenomenal,” said another. A Jewish professional said she was impressed with the numerous opportunities to do personal learning with top scholars with whom she otherwise would never have contact. “I wish I was a sponge and could wring myself out and then go in to soak up some more,” she said.

**Choices:** One major difficulty participants had was choosing from the wide array of good programs (Figure 11). There were over 230 activities listed in the program book. Of these, almost 40 were prayer or meditation services. The remaining were sessions on topics ranging from text study to Jewish philosophy, social issues, music, film, and art workshops. As many as thirteen sessions ran concurrently. One man said he was struck by the “thematic overlap” that occurred in the schedule. For example, both sessions about the GLBT issue—and he wished there were more—were offered at the same time. One was led by a “guru” in these issues, and the other by a student, and the interviewee was concerned that the latter was overwhelmed by the former.
Despite all the choices, about a third felt there were important strands of Jewish thought that were missing, but these referred more to points of view (e.g., concern that there were too few representatives of mainstream Orthodoxy or the liberal movements) rather than subject matter. Most participants talked about choice and appreciated having such a rich array of options.

“There was so much passion and knowledge and education and ...so many kinds of issues and history and people and events. Everything about the Jewish world. ... To whatever extent I wanted to experiment, I felt like I could, but I didn’t have to. There were people who went to almost no sessions and just wanted to hang out and socialize with people and they felt okay and no one gave them a hard time about it. It was really remarkable that they were able to pull that off.”

**Learning Styles:** Just over half said they were able to find sessions “very much” or “to a great extent” geared to their learning styles (Figure 12). Some people prefer to learn in lectures, and some prefer more free-flowing discussions. It is possible that complaints about teaching style were a function of which sessions participants chose to attend, but the fact that complaints were voiced at both ends of the spectrum suggests that there was a range of options. Several participants commented that sessions tended to be too frontal. One person wrote: “I think it was a brilliant first effort, and I would attend again, but something should be done to enable us to talk to each other more, rather than be talked to.” But another man said he was worried about sessions being “hi-jacked” by participants who wanted to offer their own interpretation of texts. “If I’m sitting in a class with a teacher who has spent the last 20 years of his life studying a text,” he said, “I want to get the benefit of the teacher in that one to one and a half hours and then when the teacher leaves the room—then I want to learn from my friends and colleagues and grapple with it.”
A small number of people suggested having fewer, more extended sessions. One woman liked the text centeredness of sessions. She liked that sessions were small and that she felt comfortable asking questions. A graduate student was concerned that his wife would not have a good time at Limmud NY. She was not feeling well and she had little interest in religion or study. In his description, she was basically “a cultural Jew.” But she liked the cultural pieces. Limmud, he said “wasn’t just about learning, but it defined learning in such a way as to include social action issues, politics and culture, so that everything had an educational aspect but it covered so many bases. There was something there for everyone.” The sessions his wife attended were “accessible. … not off-putting or intimidating,” and she is eager to go back to Limmud NY in 2006.

Two-thirds of survey respondents (65%) said their needs were “very much” met in regard to Jewish learning. Among people who responded to the feedback form, 93% rated the quality of sessions good or excellent.

**Empowerment and Quality:** Comments revealed a tension between empowering Jews through Limmud’s non-hierarchical model and assuring the quality of individual sessions. Most of the people involved with CAJE, Limmud UK, and Limmud NY viewed the model as one based on empowering Jews to be Jewish, to do Jewish, and to explore their Judaism in a community setting where teaching and learning could happen for all participants at the same time. Limmud’s flat structure was meant to create a safe environment in which the lines between teacher and student would blur, and learners would feel empowered and accepted. Researchers in the field have suggested that effective adult education is fundamentally democratic, an environment in which teachers serve more as *midwives* to help learners bring forth new ideas, rather than as *bankers* to dispense wisdom. (Schuster, 2003).
The other side of this empowerment, however, is a potential unevenness in quality of instruction—an issue the Jerusalem Fellows discussed in their unpublished essay about Limmud UK in 2002. To some extent, the planners of Limmud assumed that the empowerment/quality tension would find its own balance. People would attend the sessions led by presenters with established reputations for excellence. In a marketplace in which quality determined choice, participants would attend the best sessions. But in the UK, no one has thought of limiting the presenters to the super stars. The idea is for everyone to learn by doing.

Concern about educational qualifications was expressed by a professional in the field of Jewish education who was asked to teach a session at the last minute. He said it left him “wondering about the process of how educators were selected.” Although he found some of the sessions “very interesting,” others he considered “mediocre.” Another presenter said “There needs to be more quality control. Some of the sessions were too amorphous or too elementary.”

Despite the concerns of professional educators, Limmud NY’s stance on empowerment seems to have had some powerful success. One piece of evidence is that two-thirds of the survey respondents felt their learning needs were “very much” met (Figure 13). Interview data suggest what respondents mean when they say that learning needs are met. For example, one participant felt that she had accomplished her goal—“to know the text
firsthand so I could feel closer to it, make it my own, and understand it without someone helping.” A presenter said she liked the non-hierarchical learning community that was formed at Limmud. She “does not like that line in the Jewish community between those who teach and learners.” At Limmud she found that she was attending sessions led by people who had earlier attended hers. A third example is a young man with very little Jewish education who spoke in an interview of feeling incapable of leading a discussion on Talmud at his university because he knows so much less than the students who had the benefit of day school or yeshivah education. But of Limmud NY he said, “What struck me the most was … there was no difference between the students and the teachers, the listeners and the presenters. There was this sense that everyone were peers. So there would be someone presenting and then someone older than them would ask a question and I would be on no less a level than either of them.”

**Spirituality**

Only about one-third of Limmud NY participants said spiritual exploration had contributed “a lot” to their decision to attend. But not all participants who came looking for spirituality found it. When asked to what extent Limmud NY met their needs and interests in the area of spirituality only 26% said “very much.”

Worship services fared somewhat better among participants. Diverse prayer services were offered, and 41% of participants felt their needs in that regard were “very much” met. The program book, which listed sessions in multiple tracks, had four columns of programs listed under “Spirituality.” These ranged from prayer services to an outdoor nature walk, from “Drum Circle” to “If AA Isn’t Christian, Why are All the Meetings in Church Basements,” from “Kabbalistic Healing” to “King David as Husband: The Story of David and Michal.” Still, some participants felt that something was missing for them in regard to prayer and spirituality. One woman who came seeking a meaningful prayer experience at Limmud tried yoga but did not find that or any of the different prayer options significantly different from the one she generally has. Another participant commented that she would have liked more “spiritually oriented programs.” Still another said, “Spirituality was very much lacking, in my opinion.”

Views of Shabbat at Limmud vary. On the one hand, some interviewees who had attended or knew about Limmud UK thought it was a mistake to begin Limmud NY on Shabbat. They thought the UK model of having Shabbat optional would work better. On the other hand, one interviewee for whom spirituality is essential said the thing that she loved the most about it was having so many different services going on Friday night and Saturday “all under one roof.” For her that was “thrilling!” Another respondent commented that “the structure of prayer services for Shabbat was ideal; I would like to see a shul that works like that.” For a middle-aged couple, Limmud NY represented everything they feel their suburban congregation fails to provide: “To pray together in the community on Shabbat mornings and on the holidays and to observe … you have to affiliate with a label in today’s world. … What gives us most pleasure is being able to pray in an unlabeled setting.”
Social Action

Perhaps because Limmud NY happened less than a month after the Tsunami disaster, participants were eager to talk about how they could get involved and help. Animated conversations about what the Jewish response should be took place in the lobby between sessions.

Limmud NY listed over 60 sessions in the Social Issues track. Thirteen sessions were listed in the Martin Luther King, Jr. track, all but three of which were also listed under Social Issues. Many of the sessions listed under Social Issues were also listed in other tracks such as ‘Jewish Gospel’ and the film Discordia (Arts/Culture track), ‘Women in the Jewish Community’ (under both History and Community tracks), and ‘Comic Scenes from a Rabbinic Wedding: Nedarim 50b’ (Torah Lishmah, High School Recommended, and Arts/Culture). Despite the number of social action sessions that were offered, participants thought there could have been more.

Not very many people commented in the survey on social action or social justice programming. One respondent thought Limmud NY spent too much time on denominational differences “rather than Jews taking up a role of social action in the world generally.” One person said “the tone of the social action component [was] intolerantly, and knee-jerkily lefty and not self-critical.” Another on the opposite side of the political spectrum had a similar complaint. He was concerned that Limmud was “overwhelmingly progressive, liberal, or left of center. It was like we were talking to ourselves.”

But some people felt they benefited from the social action sessions. When asked in an interview about what challenged her at Limmud NY, one woman said it made her more aware and in touch with social justice, advocacy, and the need for Jewish people to be involved in the world and to make a difference. She had started to become more aware and involved through her congregation and other Jewish organizations, but “hearing all these people at Limmud,” she now feels she is not doing enough.

Limmud NY offered many sessions about social action and social issues. The theme of Martin Luther King Jr. was woven into many sessions given over the weekend. One interviewee said “it wasn’t just about learning but defining learning in such a way as to include social action issues, politics, and culture so that everything had an educational aspect.” For this person, social action was defined as part of Jewish learning.

Community

Most people came to Limmud NY with the expectation of being part of a community and meeting new people (Figure 14). Some came to be with a community that they were already part of. They came with their friends and with Jewish professional colleagues. “To be honest, many friends of mine were involved in the planning,” one man said. It seemed “appealing in the sense that I passionately love to learn Jewishly, Jewish culture, Jewish life, and Jewish art. The notion of doing that in a community was very exciting to me.”
Figure 14: Community
To what extent did the following aspects of Limmud NY contribute to your decision to attend?

Many people came with friends but some, 24%, came alone (Figure 15). Some who came alone already knew people who were attending; others did not. For most participants, the community at Limmud NY seemed friendly and warm (78%). The relationships formed centered on the time and place of Limmud and seem not to have extended into life back home. Very few participants (5%) have spent a great deal of time since Limmud NY with friends they made while there.

Limmud NY attracted a diverse group with diverse needs. For some of the single participants, it was important to meet new people or potential partners. For parents who brought their children, it was important that the children find a meaningful learning and social experience. For people who came with others, it was important to spend time with their friends—to learn together and be part of the ruah of the event. GBLT's looked forward to finding an accepting space within a Jewish community. Jewish professionals attended to present while at the same time enjoying Shabbat and the event. Some were also studying Limmud NY to assess its potential in their own settings. Not everyone’s needs could be met. Some had difficulty with the social aspect of the program and some had difficulty with the way the Shabbat dinner was managed.
For some of those who came alone and wanted to meet people, Limmud’s preponderance of Upper West Side society could seem a little daunting. One of the most frequent complaints (there were nine comments about this in the survey and several among the interviewees) was that it was a challenge to make new friends. Fifteen percent said they had “none” or “only a little” time to socialize. One participant commented that there were few opportunities to socialize or find out about other attendees “without one’s own tenacious efforts.” Seventeen percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement “I felt like an outsider.” Of particular concern was the absence of opportunities for young people to meet. A college student from a school without a Hillel enthusiastically volunteered and participated but found it difficult to break into the groups of students from NYU or Columbia. A young man from New York was disappointed that he did not meet a potential significant other.

Shabbat dinner, which was designed with community building in mind, had its own set of issues. The room was too large and the acoustics prevented people from hearing others at their own table or the people who led bentshing. Despite individual volunteer table hosts who attempted to help people mingle, 27% of respondents felt that Shabbat dinner did not create a sense of community. One distressed person, who liked everything else about Limmud NY, wrote on the feedback form “No banging tables, clicking silverware or clanking glasses Friday mealtime. I had to leave the dining room, because it gave me a headache. These noisemakers should go to a separate room. I want Shabbat shalom!”

At the same time, most people found Limmud NY friendly. They found people to eat with, talk to, and learn from. Single people did manage to meet each other, and two couples who met at Limmud are planning weddings. A rabbinical student went on his own, met people he knew beforehand and befriended new people he is still in touch with. A suburban couple met people from their shul and made new friends as well. A couple from Manhattan met people from their building whom they had seen but never talked to. A young woman who straddles the Conservative/Orthodox divide was happy to meet people from other
congregations she would not have met otherwise. She said it “stretched my Jewish community.” Two young men spoke of their enjoyment of the multigenerational aspect of Limmud. One said:

“I was overwhelmed that so many people were there from all walks of life, especially the seniors. I made a few friends. We saw one at a follow-up party this winter, and she called herself *bubbe*.”

One of the volunteers spoke of her enjoyment meeting and greeting people as they arrived at the hotel on Friday. A presenter said that one of the nicest things for him personally about being at Limmud NY was the chance to spend time with his colleagues in a more leisurely, social way. He particularly appreciated the interstices between sessions and the comfortable sofas in the lobby where one could sit and have conversations. Limmud NY was a great social experience for those who came with friends or already knew people there. “I did not make new friends,” one said, “but I spent time with people I already knew—and enjoyed it a lot!”

**Religious Diversity**

One of the most important parts of Limmud NY and one of its greatest successes was creating a Jewishly diverse community of learners. On both ends of the denominational spectrum, there were people who thought their position was under-represented, but most participants regarded Limmud NY as wonderfully diverse and accepting. They appreciated the dialogue and the openness of the program and its attempts to include as wide a range of Jewish identities and affiliations as possible.

Limmud was viewed as welcoming diversity by 90% of participants (Figure 16). Very few respondents found Limmud either too religiously liberal (7%) or too religiously observant (7%), although those who did were vocal about it. More typical is one of Limmud NY’s planners who described how important it was for her personally to grapple with issues around inter-denominational relations. She told of organizers’ willingness to engage in thoughtful discussion, and she welcomed the opportunity to be part of it.
Fewer than a third of participants said they had met people with different religious points of view, although this finding may be the result of personal choices rather than the absence of people from different backgrounds or practices. Slightly less than half felt they learned about forms of Judaism different from their own (Figure 16). This may be about personal choices. One interviewee attended minyanim which she knew would have the people and the flavor of her own congregation. Although she came on her own, she socialized and davened with the people from her congregation.

Other participants reveled in the diversity. A college freshman’s enthusiasm is evident in her words:

“I had no idea what to expect. I was told there would be text study with people of different denominations, [but they came] from a billion different backgrounds and all considered themselves Jewish in one way or another. It was amazing when I got there to see a mini-census of the Jewish world. It was somewhat overwhelming at first, but awesome.”

At some point in Limmud NY’s discussion, organizers shifted their language from “pluralism” to “diversity.” Rather than looking for common ground or trying to have discussions to deal with the philosophical and theological divisions, they offered an array of choices. A Limmud participant could attend a Carlebach minyan for kabbalat Shabbat, a Storahtelling Shabbat morning service, a mehitzah minyan for mincha and a havdalah happening for maariv and never have to attend a service with a denominational label.
It is perhaps a credit to Limmud NY rather than a criticism that some people came away thinking even more could be done. It showed an appreciation for the richness such diversity could offer. “If Limmud could stretch the inclusivity a little bit more for next year, it would enhance everyone’s experience.”

**Celebration**

One of the words associated with Limmud is “celebration.” Limmud was a “celebration” of Jewish learning. “I think we need to bring back joy to American Jewish life,” an organizer said. Participants picked up that language of celebration when describing Limmud NY.

First, almost everyone (71%) said it was “fun.” People talked about what they “enjoyed” about Limmud NY. “In general it seemed to be such a celebration,” one person said. Another spoke of the “thrill and delight of creating a community of learners.” One of the presenters said he chose to come to Limmud NY because “it sounded like fun.”

Some participants particularly enjoyed the arts and culture portion of Limmud, although only a little over a third said their needs had been met in regard to creative expression (See Figure 13). Some would have liked even more music and body movement and more integration of the performing arts with other aspects of Limmud. The havdalah ceremony was a good example of the performing arts generating an environment of celebration. A Reform student talked about how surprised he was to see Orthodox students enjoying the havdalah service with songs he identified with the Reform movement. The celebration opened his eyes to something he and Orthodox Hillel students from his school had in common. Along with having a significant impact on his understanding of other forms of Judaism, it was a joyful learning experience for him. A Limmud NY presenter said she was most thrilled when she met artists and noticed how they were “moving the Jewish world forward through music.”

“What I loved the most about the whole conference was that it was a chance to celebrate the fact that it’s a multi-faceted tradition.”
THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT HAPPEN

The non-hierarchical format of Limmud goes beyond educational programming. It is the critical element for planning, facilitating, presenting, and performing. As the lines between teacher and student blur, so too do the lines between what professionals and lay leaders can do. With the exception of Limmud’s director and two part-time interns, no one was paid for any element of their efforts on Limmud NY. As might be expected, not everything at Limmud NY ran with professional efficiency and issues arose for the planners and presenters even before the event took place. But Limmud NY attaches value to the volunteer experience in and of itself. This section examines how that experience worked for planners, presenters, and performers.

Planners

A young urban professional joined the planning team of Limmud NY because she cares about building community. She was looking for something to be passionate about and wasn’t finding that in her job. In Limmud she found a pluralistic mission. “It’s validating,” she said. “Come as you are, open yourself to something new. … [It’s a ] truly non-judgmental, non-coercive, integrated environment where being Jewish is about more than praying three times a day or studying a particular way. We love being Jewish; we love Torah; and we want to see how Torah can be part of our lives whether it’s doing yoga or singing or listening to an esteemed teacher or having a discussion with someone late at night about the meaning of life.”

The volunteer role was not easy. She “expected a lot of work and it was far beyond a lot of work ...[because] we didn’t have enough people to do everything.” Accomplishing practical tasks (getting people on buses from New York City on Friday) in a pluralistic community involved hours of process discussions. “Something would be decided and then undecided and then we would have to re-decide it and that just made me crazy!”

But seeing the results of her efforts made it worthwhile. “For people to come together and have a glimpse of that energy. …Sometimes you just get this feeling of excitement about being alive and about being with all these people who are so wonderful.”

Eighty-one people were involved in the planning of Limmud NY 2005. Relative to the rest of the participants at Limmud, they were younger and they were more likely to be living alone and unaffiliated denominationally. Over half of the planners were from the Upper West Side of Manhattan and more than 60% were from Manhattan. Fifty-five percent of the planners were employees in the Jewish sector—a significantly greater proportion than the 26% for participants who were not involved in the planning. At least one Jewish professional said she received time from her employer to do some of the work for Limmud NY.
The degree of satisfaction with the experience and the amount of time they spent varied greatly. When they were asked how much time they volunteered per month leading up to the event, some (16%) did not reply. The other indicated varying amounts of time. This variability corroborates what volunteers said in interviews and in comments on the survey. The burden of the work was not distributed evenly among the volunteers. Since it was a start-up year, people perhaps did not know what to expect in terms of the amount or nature of the work.

Table 6: Amount of Time Volunteering: Prior to and During Limmud NY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leading up to Limmud NY (Per month)</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than an hour per month</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 hours per month</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 hours per month</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 hours per month</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 15 hours per month</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>During Limmud NY</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 hours</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 hours</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 hours</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 15 hours</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the event itself, this disparity in the amount of time people contributed was even greater with 50% spending less than five hours over the course of the four days, and 30% spending 11 hours or more (Table 6).

About half of the planners felt highly appreciated, but close to half did not (Figure 17). And whereas many felt the experience was gratifying and a good use of their time, more than half were less enthusiastic in their responses to these questions. Given that over half of the planning volunteers were employed by Jewish organizations, it is not surprising that they felt the experience did little to increase their understanding of the Jewish community, but few said they learned new leadership skills or had the opportunity to expand their social circle.
Unfortunately, some of the people involved in planning Limmud NY did not have positive experiences. Of the 22 people who commented on their volunteer experience, ten had complaints. These were primarily centered around the amount of work, the lack of support during the event, and the lack of adequate opportunity for volunteers to attend sessions and participate in activities. “Due to the lack of volunteers at the conference, I was not able to attend any of the classes except two. This was unfortunate. I felt like an employee and not a volunteer.” This respondent regretted having to pay money to come to Limmud NY when she was able to experience so little of it. Another said, “It was a lot more work than I was expecting—I often got sucked into projects that weren’t part of my team.”
Figure 18: How likely are you to be involved in planning Limmud NY next year?

Still another respondent said, “I believe strongly in Limmud and what it stands for.” But she went on to say that the volunteer component has to be strengthened. It has to be made fun, rewarding, gratifying. It was “too corporate,” she said, and she suggested doing something to “increase the warm feeling.” Although she is very likely to return to Limmud NY next year, she says she will not return as a planner. Another volunteer echoed her suggestion for building camaraderie among the planners.

If the organizational planning was “too corporate,” it might explain the comments of one volunteer who claimed to be *disempowered* when the steering committee “shot down” proposals from team members. In a similar vein, another volunteer felt the work was boring. She “ended up doing mostly database entry, mailings, and other administrative stuff. I would have liked to have gotten a more hands-on role—attended a few team meetings—i.e. gotten a flavor of what else was going on.”

Other volunteers had very positive experiences. The best part for one person was “making new friends,” and the extent to which planners felt they had time to socialize was no worse than for other survey respondents despite having to help out and attend to details. A planner who was part of the teen program thought it was a great idea and is eager to be involved again next year.

Even some of those who are not likely to volunteer again appreciated the experience and were ready to recommend it to others.

“It was a personally difficult but rewarding experience. Though I am not ready yet to repeat it (I’m still absorbing lessons of leadership and partnership from last year), I’d highly recommend it to others.”
One the planners interviewed for this report said she would love to serve on one or two specific committees with just a few people rather than working with a “whole slew of information.” She described the excitement of the last meetings before the event itself and her feelings saying goodbye to people when the bus left them off at 110th and Broadway, “people that had only been names before … There was an amazing connection I’d made.”

One of Limmud NY’s founders explained that the volunteer aspect of NY is “a key test of our success—whether we can extend and deepen the kind of volunteer leadership that we’ve begun. … The fact that it’s created by your peer group—that’s about empowerment and engagement [which are] rare in American Jewish life.” For him, the heart of the program is in its creation. The planning, rather than the program itself, is the source of empowerment, leadership development, and transformation. The volunteer corps will be the “energized base” who will eventually revitalize the lay leadership of the American Jewish community. A lot of weight, therefore, rides on the experiences of volunteers and their suggestions for change. Making their work more meaningful, satisfying and appreciated is key to accomplishing Limmud’s mission.

**Presenters**

An author-educator-performer came to Limmud to teach and to learn—“To take the experience and grow and nourish myself— making that time to study and learn. And at the same time bringing and giving what I have to give to others. … It’s the idea that I can give and I can take. I got a lot from this experience, there’s no question, personally and professionally. All I need is one thought, one idea, one *midrash*, one new piece of knowledge, one new interpretation and suddenly I can run with it and take it and integrate it into something new.”

“It was a phenomenal experience,” she says, “a way for people to come together to celebrate Judaism, to celebrate learning and teaching … going on simultaneously. … I can be teaching a class at 1:00 and at 2:00 I’m sitting in someone else’s class. It was celebratory. I just love that whole idea of sitting and learning from wonderful teachers. The frustration is the choice. Choosing between so many good people. And the people who attended were absolutely wonderful. Sitting at different people’s tables at different meals and talking. It was just wonderful.”

There were 104 presenters/performers, so one in six adult participants presented or performed. Almost half of them were male. In denominational affiliation and age, they were similar to other Limmud adult participants.

Their name tags did not distinguish them from other participants, and in the *hevruta* study session preceding *havdalah*, they were mixed in with other people. Participants with little or no training in textual analysis could find themselves sharing ideas with rabbis, seminary professors, or authors of commentary. For some interviewees who were not presenters or performers this could be an enormously empowering experience.
The program booklet was arranged so that participants could select sessions by track (interest area), time slot, or by presenter. A short—not more than one-paragraph—biography appeared under the name of each presenter. Despite the idea of a non-hierarchical model in which everyone would be equal, participants could and did make selections based on presenters whose names they knew. And a hierarchy existed among presenters and performers. Some received no remuneration while others had their travel and registration expenses paid for. Those in the latter category were also able to bring their spouses or partners at half price. Those in the former category were not aware that others were receiving financial support to attend. For at least one of them, the cost of bringing family members was prohibitive which meant the presenter’s donation went beyond time and effort in preparation and included sacrificing a valuable long weekend of family time.

Most presenters and performers (82%) found Limmud NY “very much” or “to a great extent” a positive experience. Half of the performers and presenters who responded to the survey led three or more sessions, but few complained about not being able to attend other sessions.

Presenters expressed three areas of concern in their survey comments: inadequate attendance at their sessions, scheduling and other logistical difficulties, and the quality of other presenters’ sessions. Working hard to develop a presentation and then competing against speakers who drew overflow crowds was frustrating, particularly to those who were relative novices to presenting. Logistical problems included too many sessions scheduled in certain timeslots, not enough time between sessions, inadequate information about room changes, and inadequate facilities.

The other main concern expressed by at least six of the survey respondents in comments was inconsistent quality of presentations. Two suggested that sessions be labeled according to level of difficulty or required experience. Three said there was not enough text study. One suggested, “I would have liked to have seen more text-based sessions and a higher level of learning.” Other presenters thought particular points of view were underrepresented. One thought Limmud NY needed to attract more Israelis; another would have liked more liberal perspectives; and another thought Limmud needed more Orthodox participation.

Table 7: Number of Sessions Conducted by Presenters/Performers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In how many sessions did you present or perform? (n=88)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38
Figure 19: Presenters and Performers
To what extent...

- were the setting and equipment appropriate? 61%
- were you stimulated by the questions and discussion? 52%
- did you have to change your usual presentation style? 5%
- were there participants you have taught elsewhere? 4%
- did you accomplish what you set out to do? 73%

Figure 19 shows responses to a set of post-Limmud survey questions asked only of presenters. Although almost all said that participants were not the same people they were accustomed to teaching, they did not feel a need to adjust the content of their work. When asked about the challenge of teaching people at multiple levels of learning, one presenter responded:

“When I teach, I use the following assumption. People have life experience and real human issues. Judaism can help develop those issues. Then I bring a text to be a medium to have that discussion. For example, the issue of forgiveness. You don’t need to have gone to day school to ask or seek forgiveness—it’s very human.”

The texts he brought were advanced, but he was able to go through them, he thought, on an “adequate step by step basis.” He thought the participants in his session were able to understand nuances and have a good discussion.

When asked in interviews, most presenters and performers said they were comfortable or already familiar with the intellectual content of Limmud NY’s program. When pressed, most acknowledged that they had attended sessions or done something that was new and different for them, and that gave them a sense of personal fulfillment. One Orthodox rabbi attended a drumming session that energized him, and he particularly appreciated a meditative practice he learned. Another presenter said he took a session on the story of Joseph, and there were “many textual analyses—themes and sub-themes” that he had never really focused on. A third said she loved the learning, the wisdom, the diverse perspectives. “I wanted to be at everything,” she said, but it was exposure to artists and
musicians that moved her most. Another felt enriched by having the opportunity to study with people she had heard of and read about but had never study with previously.

Overall, presenters and performers shared the joy of Limmud. Almost three-quarters felt that they had “very much” or “to a great extent” accomplished what they set out to do in their sessions. They found participants, according to one of them, “grateful, among the best, warmest participants I’ve had.” Another presenter said he “loved the seriousness of the people there.” His favorite part was “listening to the true commitment of people trying to understand things in a deeper way. I loved that,” he said, “I really loved that.”

“I loved the experience of teaching at Limmud; it was an honor.”

CHANGE

Most participants at Limmud NY were already committed and passionate Jews. Expecting them to become more affiliated or more active within the organizations they already belonged to was unrealistic. The “buzz” about Limmud UK in the community tended to create outsized expectations for what Limmud NY could achieve—especially in its first year. Some people felt disappointed that it did not change their lives. Some felt they already knew enough and were active enough that they did not expect to be changed.

The data from the pre- and post-program survey do not show marked changes in patterns of affiliation or activity, nor can the changes that did surface be assumed to have resulted from Limmud NY. Nonetheless, there are indications that Limmud has had an influence that is expanding and energizing the base for a new, more energetic approach to Jewish learning.

Almost two-thirds of participants found it highly personally meaningful. Twenty-one percent agreed with the statement that they had learned something new about themselves. Most said they are “very” or “extremely” likely to return next year, and a third said that it was very or extremely likely that they would bring someone with them who did not attend this year. Twenty percent said they will be involved in planning next year. These numbers represent an energy for moving Limmud NY forward—to expand the number of people who attend and, perhaps more importantly, the number of people who will donate time and effort to make it happen.

Further, 25% of survey respondents said that since Limmud NY they had looked into Jewish learning activities that were new to them. They have explored JCC classes, ALMA NY, Me’ah, the Melton Project, Daf Yomi, and various other courses. Some are studying Hebrew and others are trying out new forms of artistic expression. Two have enrolled in Pardes. One has joined a Rosh Chodesh group.

In addition, 32% of respondents (122) have volunteered for organizations other than Limmud NY which they had not been involved with previously. Volunteerism is taking
place in social welfare organizations (n=27), synagogues (n=16), Jewish education (n=11), and Israel-related causes (n=10).

Of course, it is possible that the motivation to look into the learning opportunities or to volunteer for new organizations existed before Limmud NY and that Limmud was, for these people, part of a generalized high level of interest and activity. Beyond the numbers, however, the interviews reveal some of the changes in how people see themselves as Jews—and how their less Jewishly involved spouses or partners responded to the event.

In one example of the energized base, a young woman with an extensive background in Jewish learning realized her need to share.

“I appreciate the fact that I’ve learned so much, and I want that for everyone. I can use my skills and talent to help a given society in the future, and not everyone can do that. No one person brings every last thing, but I have a responsibility to use what I do have for the benefit of some society as a whole because I realize that not everyone has that ability. This is the first time I’ve ever put it like that; this is what I took from Limmud.”

Another young woman had recently moved back to New York after college. She was interested in Jewish study before Limmud and being stimulated to study more about Abraham Joshua Heschel was not a major change in direction for her, but it was, she said, an outcome of her participation in the event. Perhaps more significantly, she said, she is now interested in joining a synagogue in New York. She wants to get involved in the Jewish community.

A man from New York who has spent a great deal of time in Jewish study and lay leadership is continuing his involvement with the planning of Limmud NY 2005. He now looks forward to having Limmud as a community where he and his wife and children can “make new friends, be challenged, hear what other people are doing and thinking.”

“Limmud,” he said, “is by far the most significant Jewish volunteer experience that I’ve ever been involved with … it is the most significant.” Now he is excited about “trying to figure out where we take it from here, getting that geographic diversity and demographic diversity.”

A participant from the Midwest came to Limmud NY, she said, hoping to figure out, with input from others, the next step for her own Jewish education. The feedback from participants in the sessions she ran validated for her that she is on the right track with her work. And she wants to bring Limmud to her own city.

Other interviewees talked about the influence of Limmud NY on their spouses, partners, or other family members. Asked if he would bring anyone next year who had not come this year, one of the presenters said that prior to the event, he had not thought of inviting family members to Limmud NY because he “didn’t think it would translate so widely.” He realized afterwards that “they would have had a wonderful time had they come,” and he
regretted not having asked them. Next time he will have a list of people to call and say, ‘look, you’d enjoy this.’

A graduate student in Jewish studies did not feel personally changed by Limmud NY, but “more than anything else, the fact that my wife is willing to go back is a compliment to their ability to create that atmosphere.” She had not been very active Jewishly and often felt intimidated in Jewish settings. Being at Limmud NY “she didn’t feel ignorant or judged,” and is now willing to do much more than before.

Finally, three people want to use their experience at Limmud NY to help create change in other Jewish institutions. For one, it is his synagogue. He is trying to think of ways to help his congregation become more diverse and accepting of other forms of Judaism.

“This is the future of Judaism. We’ve got to stop all this ‘you’re not like me so I don’t like you’ kind of stuff. Stop the compartmentalization. This is the future of Judaism: learning together and praying together and eating together.”

He knows that his vision for his suburban synagogue will be difficult to achieve but hopes to take some steps in moving toward the greater openness he appreciated at Limmud.

For another it was his school’s Hillel. He also came away with a rejuvenated commitment to pluralism and inclusiveness and hopes to bring it into new Hillel initiatives. A third participant said she looked to Limmud NY as a role model for communities and families. The indirect influence of Limmud can also be seen in the remarks of a Jewish educator who continues to refer to her notes from Limmud NY sessions when preparing for classes.

These changes are difficult to quantify, but they are important to appreciate. Yes, some Limmud NY volunteers came back “burnt out” and there were presenters who felt there was little for them to learn, but most Limmud NY 2005 attendees plan to be back next year and to bring friends and family members. Many are coming primarily because it was fun. It was a celebration of being Jewish. Others are coming to continue the learning. Some have been changed and some may be changed in the future.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limmud NY 2005 represented an important new paradigm in Jewish education in the United States. It set out with four objectives: diversity, learning, community, and volunteerism. Organizers hoped Limmud NY would attract a diverse group of people from the Greater New York City area and provide them with a non-hierarchical learning community through volunteer leadership. It intended to create a comfortable space and time to be totally Jewish, “to relax, reflect, and celebrate” and explore a wide variety of options for worship and study.

In most of its goals, Limmud had noticeable success and exceeded the expectations of planners and participants. But it also confronted a number of challenges. When participants and presenters responded to the open-ended questions in the survey, most of them would say something extremely positive followed by a suggestion to make some aspect of the event better. That in itself is a sign of commitment to Limmud NY—to improving it for the future. Not all the findings from this report are positive and some of the less effective aspects of Limmud NY 2005 need to be addressed in planning for the 2006 event. It is important to study Limmud NY as an experiment—one that is non-hierarchical, diverse, and celebratory. In that spirit, this report presents conclusions and recommendations.

Diversity

Over 600 people from diverse age groups, denominational backgrounds, and lifestyles came together for four days of study and celebration of Jewish life and learning. Most intend to return and continue the pursuit of Jewish knowledge and community. But Limmud NY drew the most affiliated and active of the population. It drew extensively from Manhattan and particularly from the Upper West Side. There were twice as many females as males and a disproportionate number of single adults.

The vast majority of Limmud NY participants felt that respect for diversity was one of Limmud NY’s strongest attributes. Still there were those who thought particular denominations or points of view dominated. These people usually thought their own strand of Judaism or political leaning had received short shrift.

Recommendations

Planning meetings should be held outside of Manhattan, perhaps in Westchester and Long Island as well as Brooklyn or Queens. They should continue to reach out to GLBTs, Jews of color, Israelis, Russian immigrants, and Sephardic Jews to deepen and broaden the diversity of the event. At the same time, attention should be paid to suburban Jewish families, to bringing in children and their parents and helping them create Jewish memories. Over half of the planners of Limmud NY 2005 live on the Upper West Side. Limmud NY needs to do more to recruit planners from the other boroughs and suburban communities.
A strategy should be developed to help make Limmud NY as attractive to men as it is to women. Devising such a strategy may mean soliciting the views of men who have attended and family members of those who did not. Perhaps focus groups with male college students would produce new ideas.

One participant suggested finding less affiliated younger Jews through *Birthright Israel*. Hillel is an effective marketing channel to some Jewish college students, but Limmud may have to go beyond it to Jewish Studies departments, Jewish sororities and fraternities and secular media outlets on campus.

Several participants suggested that the liberal/progressive slant of Limmud NY needs to be balanced with more politically conservative opinions. It may be helpful to extend invitations in that direction.

Limmud NY may want to publicize the statistics on who came to Limmud NY and who presented so that participants realize that both ends of the spectrum were represented. Some have suggested that Orthodox or Reform and Reconstructionists should be targeted more for next year which may entail less concentration on Conservative and Conservadox Jews—as planners, participants, and presenters. But this would mean identifying and labeling people denominationally in a way that many Limmud participants and planners are uncomfortable with.

The most effective form of communication has been “word-of-mouth” and many people came because they knew founders and planners. Spreading the ‘buzz’ this way is slow, but the example of Limmud UK indicates that it can happen. Organizers will have to draw planners from more diverse backgrounds if the diversity of Limmud participants is to expand.

**Learning**

Limmud participants, presenters, and planners learned from their Limmud NY experiences and felt that sessions in all tracks—from *Torah Lishmah* to Arts and Culture, from Social Issues to History—had much to offer. Limmud NY created an atmosphere in which most people enjoyed Jewish study. Some presenters and professional Jewish educators were less intellectually challenged by the sessions than their fellow participants, but most gave Limmud high marks for its educational content.

Most participants came to Limmud NY already involved in Jewish study, but between 25% and 30% of respondents are doing something more now either in Jewish learning or volunteering than they were doing before. Although it cannot be said that this is the result of Limmud NY, it suggests increased Jewish vitality among participants. Some individual participants spoke of personal changes they had experienced as a result of Limmud NY. For some it was intense, for others it was relatively minor. For some there is potential indirect impact on other Jews or Jewish institutions.
Recommendations

Consider introducing tracks by level. Advanced Torah study could require downloading texts (from the Limmud NY website) and advance preparation of assignments. Art and culture workshops could require preparation of artistic interpretations of texts for discussion or stories to be shared. Some sessions could be offered in Hebrew. Others could be given with a suggestion that ‘prior knowledge of the topic is advised.’ Sessions for people with less background in Jewish education could be labeled accordingly: ‘no prior knowledge of the topic is required,’ or ‘an introduction to…’

Another way to offer more levels is to offer a few longer, more in-depth study opportunities, so that a participant could take two or three sessions back-to-back on a single topic. These could be offered by the same presenter or different presenters. Perhaps some ‘how-to’ workshops could help prepare presenters for the following year. (One such sessions was presented last year.) Or, if more senior educators were willing to become informal mentors for people with less experience, Limmud may be able to provide those connections.

While Jewish educators may want a higher level of educational content, that has to be done with respect for those who come to Limmud with less background. It is important that an event designed to be non-hierarchical not become elitist in tone. This issue could perhaps prove an interesting topic for a panel discussion at Limmud.

Community

Attendees studied, prayed and ate together. Most had fun and identified the experience as a celebration. For four days they formed a vibrant learning community. But not all Limmud NY participants were equally part of the community formed by the event. Some people felt left out. For those who came not knowing any of the other participants, it could be difficult to penetrate existing groups.

Recommendations

More can be done to arrange ‘meet and greet’ opportunities, especially for people who come on their own. These can be by affinity groups (GLBTs, college students, people who have studied in Israel, people born in Brooklyn), but it is important at the same time to maintain the intergenerational aspect of Limmud which was a great attraction to young and old alike.

Friday night Shabbat dinner has to be rethought. Participants suggested breaking it down into smaller groupings in smaller rooms with less noise. This, like worship services, may need to be available in a variety of practices so that those who want to bentsh birkat can do so in the way they find most meaningful. Some presenters suggested that starting with Shabbat may have been off-putting to participants who came from backgrounds less familiar with its observance. This concern was found solely among presenters;
participants—those who may have been less familiar with Shabbat observance—seemed to have had little trouble acclimating to the environment.

**Volunteerism**

Limmud NY created a leadership base of people who planned the event. Some were more involved than others, but most plan on returning to help plan the 2006 event, and many more intend to join the effort. This has been and will continue to be an opportunity for younger and perhaps less affluent New Yorkers to develop leadership skills in the Jewish community. But not all aspects of the planning and volunteer process were effective. Given that an almost all volunteer organization made the program happen as smoothly as it did, it may seem churlish to criticize, but some did, and their views should be heard.

**Recommendations**

More should be done to recruit volunteers from beyond the Upper West Side and Manhattan into leadership positions. Limmud NY’s organizers should also think about other means of recruiting planners. For example, planning professionals from secular organizations, particularly those with entry level positions in New York area organizations may appreciate the opportunity to get some higher level experience in the field. On the other end of the age spectrum, some retirees from marketing and event planning organizations might like to keep involved in a volunteer way. This may also be a way to reach less affiliated Jews.

Some planners are not returning because they were “burned out” by the amount of work. With one year of experience, there should be greater understanding of the nature and scope of some of the planning responsibilities. It should be possible to apportion some of the more demanding responsibilities more equitably. Use of additional on-site volunteers should be planned more fully. If people are willing to help, they should be sent instructions and information ahead of time.

Programming for children and for families came under criticism. Whereas some parents found the student run activities for their children stimulating, some complained it was too much like babysitting. The student leaders may require more supervision.

**Other**

Logistical and organizational issues affected the experiences of both presenters and participants.

**Recommendations**

For a large, first time experience, Limmud NY ran amazingly well, but there were logistical glitches. Limmud NY should explore how Limmud UK, CAJE, and other conferences have dealt with issues of scheduling and predicting necessary room sizes for individual presenters or topics.
Cost was an issue for some people who attended Limmud. The cost/comfort balance will have different weight for different members of the community, and Limmud participants complained on both sides. Presenters and performers need to be able to bring their family members with them. Whatever can be done to make Limmud NY affordable to the greatest number of people will enrich the experience for everyone.

Next Steps for Research

Limmud NY has spent time, money and energy trying to understand the Limmud NY experience and outcomes of the event. The research project, like Limmud itself, is an experiment in exploring a new paradigm. It is important to continue the work since any one year of Limmud NY does not stand on its own. In building the volunteer structure, energizing the base, deepening the learning and broadening participation, Limmud is a iterative process. It is important to listen to participants, planners and presenters, document that process, and help Limmud NY go from strength to strength.
REFERENCES


http://national.unitedway.org/research/generationsXY.cfm
APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

This report is based on quantitative and qualitative data. A web-based survey was
distributed before Limmud NY took place. It asked participants about how they heard
about Limmud NY and what motivated them to attend. Along with demographic data and
Jewish background information, it asked about membership and involvement in Jewish and
secular organizations. A section was also included about social, cultural, and religious
activities including Jewish behaviors and values.

Fifty-nine interviews were conducted after Limmud NY with a selection of presenters,
planners and other participants. These interviews were approximately an hour in length.
The first half asked interviewees about how they defined themselves as Jews and the major
influences on their Jewish development. The second half asked about their experiences at
Limmud NY and the impact it may have had on them.

A post-Limmud NY survey, also web-based, was conducted with all presenters, planners
and other participants four months after the event. Its purpose was to gather data about
reactions to Limmud NY and participants activities since then. There were separate
sections for presenters and planners to find out more about their experiences and the roles
they played.

A feedback paper questionnaire was distributed at Limmud NY. It was used to assess
immediate reactions. It has been used in this report only for comments and general
impressions.

Table A1: Survey Response Rates (N=595)
The total number of people contacted (N=595) is less than the total number who registered.
It does not include children or most teenagers. Teenagers, 13-17, were not contacted unless
permission had been obtained from their parents. Their number was too small to include in
the analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Survey</th>
<th>Post-Survey</th>
<th>Pre-Survey /Post/Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n/N</td>
<td>Response Rate</td>
<td>n/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Participants</td>
<td>465/595</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>425/595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planners</td>
<td>81/81</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>63/81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenters</td>
<td>76/104</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>96/104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N’ = number contacted
’n’ = number responding
APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

birkat hamazon the prayer that is recited after eating a meal that includes bread
bentshing the act of reciting the prayer after a meal (combination of Yiddish and English)
daven to pray an English (combination of Yiddish and English)
haggadah (haggadot, pl.) book used to conduct the Passover seder
halakhah: Jewish law
hamentaschen: three-sided cookies eaten during the holiday of Purim
havdalah: ceremony which ends the Sabbath and separates it from the rest of the week.
havurah (havurot, pl.): a small informal worship group, any independent or alternative worship service, or the organization that provides it
hevruta: a form of studying in pairs or in very small groups
kashrut: Jewish dietary laws
kedushah: holiness
maariv evening worship service
mehitzah (mehitzot, pl.): partition separating men from women in worship services
midrash Jewish interpretation of biblical scripture
minhah afternoon worship service
minyan (minyanim, pl.): Quorum of ten required for communal worship. Used in this report to refer to an independent or alternative worship service or the organization that provides it.
mitzvah (mitzvot, pl.): commandments
modeh ani: I give thanks; the very first prayer recited upon awakening
ruah: spirit
seder (sederim, pl.): Passover ceremonial meal
tzedakah: charity, philanthropy
yahrzeit: anniversary of the death of a relative.
yeshivah (yeshivot, pl.): Jewish rabbinical academy devoted to the study of Jewish texts.