Barry Wimpfheimer, associate professor of religious studies at Northwestern, contributes this entry to our series from the Pedagogies of Engagement in Jewish Studies seminar.

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As Director of The Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies at Northwestern University, I have insisted on a division of labor between Jewish Studies and Hillel. Jewish Studies is the site for the study of Judaism, Jews and Jewishness while Hillel is the place for exploring Jewish identity and finding community.

This division of labor benefits both parties. Hillel is able to unabashedly promote a vision of Judaism and Jewish commitment. That vision is broad and pluralistic, to be sure, but it emphasizes Jewish exceptionalism. In this way, Hillel harnesses the resources of community and university to advocate for Jewish interests on campus and beyond.

Jewish Studies, on the other hand, can invite students of all ethnic and religious identities to explore Jewish literature and the history of Jewish religion and culture without the limitation of promoting Judaism or Jewish cultural affiliation. Enrollments are increased when we target both Jewish and non-Jewish students. The history of the Jewish religion, culture and people is easily integrated in the humanities curriculum. Perhaps most fundamentally, Jewish Studies scholars are free to explore aspects of Jewish history, religion or culture that do not support the program of Jewish exceptionalism or continuity.

But is it possible that the division of labor has negative ramifications as well?

In divesting itself of the portfolio of Jewish community, Jewish Studies potentially misses out on some of the energy of a group of people who come together to explore a shared background and shared interest. More specifically, in recent years, Hillels have become
targets for Orthodox outreach organizations, which have set up extra-curricular study programs; the courses in these programs may draw students away from the formal Jewish Studies courses available on campus. The denominational reach of such programs can be surprising; students from liberal and unaffiliated Jewish backgrounds are nearly as likely as those of Conservative or Orthodox background to enroll in these alternative courses.

But there may be an even more significant negative ramification of the division of labor. College is a formative experience. Students at an elite university like Northwestern leave home, usually for the first time, and spend four autonomous years in an intentionally open environment in which they are exposed to many new things both intellectually and personally. With the rising costs of higher education there continue to be vigorous debates about the curriculum, its benefits and costs. Those of us in the humanities prefer to steer debates about benefits away from pure economic measures. We claim to have a positive impact on students’ maturity. We aspire to produce subtle thinkers and complex writers. Some of us continue to subscribe to the idea that exposure to a broad set of ideas and cultures has the transformative potential to produce graduates who are both more knowledgeable and more ethical. And whether or not these claims can be defended, scholars recognize that the college experience has a significant impact on adult identity. Students use their time in college to discover themselves as unique and independent beings in the world.

We advertise Jewish Studies to all students and make every effort to welcome all students in our classes – but the reality is that many of our students are Jewish. Some come to our courses explicitly and self-consciously to explore or challenge their Jewish identities. Other Jewish students do not come with this conscious intention, but still find themselves engaging these issues upon encountering ideas and perspectives in the classroom. Depending on the subject, their learning can be invigorating, frustrating, or potentially destabilizing. As part of my commitment to the division of labor, I have generally directed students who seem interested in identity exploration towards chaplaincy groups such as Hillel. I have been reluctant to allow students to bring their identity explorations into the classroom. As I reflect on this practice, though, I cannot but think that there is a lost opportunity here.

Jewish Studies is uniquely positioned to help students make decisions about Jewishness as part of their college maturation. The scholars who teach our courses are experts in their areas, with access to the most recent paradigms, narratives and theories. They are also (ideally) not invested in a specific vision of Jewishness, be it cultural, political or religious. A classroom environment in which both non-Jews and Jews are present creates the possibility of true choice; students know that their inclusion in the study of the subject matter is not conditioned on their willingness to toe a party line. What better setting to carry out the work of constructing a freely chosen, mature adult Jewish identity?

Traditionally, Jewish Studies has differentiated itself from other academic ethnic studies programs (Gender/Sexuality Studies, African American Studies, Asian American Studies, Latino Studies), which seem to embrace the goal of instilling students with an unapologetic pride in their identities. Unlike those programs, Jewish Studies in North America likes to trace its lineage not to the flourishing of ethnic identity politics in the 1960s but to the nineteenth century Science of Judaism as well as the two-millennium tradition of Jewish learning and scholarship.
The fact that the investments made by individual Jews and the Jewish community in Jewish Studies (which are welcome, of course) are often based on the misimpression that Jewish Studies teaches people how to be Jewish and highlights the virtues of Jewishness and Judaism on campus also contributes to a defensive posture. I and other Jewish Studies scholars routinely correct this misimpression and insist on our academic impartiality.

The above two paragraphs may come as a surprise to those familiar with Aaron Hughes’ recent critique that Jewish Studies is too parochial and has too readily enabled Jewish political organizations to coopt its institutions in support of specific Jewish and global politics. I do not aim to disagree with Hughes or even to participate in the same discussion. My sense is that the parochial characterization of national organizations and scholarly research does not dovetail with the actual experience of Jewish Studies education in elite universities. In the trenches, scholars of Jewish Studies continue to work towards an image of objective un-invested study of Jewish history, religion and culture.

And yet, I have come to wonder whether we have gone too far. By insisting on the division of labor that I have been describing, have we undermined our ability to teach Jewish students (and by extension the larger Jewish community) how to integrate a critical historicized complex version of Judaism into contemporary Jewish identity? Have we sacrificed our noblest educational aspirations – to help students to craft a meaningful life of moral and intellectual integrity, responsibility and civic and communal engagement – on the altar of scholarly objectivity?

Such a program cannot come at the expense of inviting scholars of all ethnic backgrounds into our scholarly conversation. This participation is not only politically correct; it is beneficial inasmuch as it prevents certain insider blindness. Nor can it come at the expense of inviting students of all ethnic backgrounds into our classrooms; we have a professional obligation to care for all students, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. But perhaps we can admit that Jewish Studies courses and programs can be sites at which interested students should feel able to develop a rich and nuanced sense of heritage, community and identity.