The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), founded in 1980, is dedicated to providing independent, high-quality research on issues related to contemporary Jewish life.

The Cohen Center is also the home of the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (SSRI). Established in 2005, SSRI uses innovative research methods to collect and analyze socio-demographic data on the Jewish community.
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# Table of Contents

Introduction................................................................................................................................. 1  
Methodology ............................................................................................................................... 3  
Characteristics of Interviewed Couples..................................................................................... 4  
Findings....................................................................................................................................... 7  
The Landscape of Offerings for Interfaith Households................................................................. 7  
  Missing Infrastructure for Interfaith Outreach............................................................................ 7  
  Preference for Providing Integrated versus Specialized Programming................................. 8  
  Institutional Assumptions about Why Interfaith Couples Do not Participate....................... 9  
  Living Outside of Squirrel Hill is Seen as a Rejection of the Jewish Community ................. 10  
  Pittsburgh’s Suburbs Afford Limited Jewish Opportunities.................................................... 11  
  Newcomers Encounter Challenges Integrating into Pittsburgh Social Life........................... 11  
The Experiences and Perspectives of Interfaith Couples.......................................................... 11  
  Most Couples Perceive Jewish Organizations as Welcoming of Interfaith Households 11  
  Interfaith Couples are not Averse to Affiliation with Jewish Institutions ............................. 13  
  Effective Points of Entry to Jewish Engagement...................................................................... 14  
  Evolving Perspectives on Raising Children............................................................................. 15  
  Impact of the Shootings............................................................................................................ 19  
Recommendations........................................................................................................................ 21  
  Create Roles and Collaborations that Focus on the Needs of Interfaith Families ............... 21  
  Expand Satellite Offerings Outside of Squirrel Hill................................................................. 22
Expand Jewish Daycare Options, Especially in the Suburbs ........................................ 22
Offer Specialized and Integrated Opportunities .......................................................... 22
Lead with Content Relevant to Life Stage ..................................................................... 22
Offer Diverse Programming in Diverse Spaces ............................................................. 23
Notes .............................................................................................................................. 25
References ..................................................................................................................... 27
List of Figures

Figure 1: Relationship status by couple ................................................................. 4
Figure 2: Parental status by couple ..................................................................... 4
Figure 3: Geographic location of residence ......................................................... 5
Figure 4: Length of residence in Pittsburgh area ................................................. 5
Introduction

The start of the 21st century saw dramatic shifts in the demographic profile of Pittsburgh. The contraction of the manufacturing industry over the last quarter of the 20th century had resulted in an exodus of young adults. A 2003 Rand policy paper noted that “many Pittsburgh residents are older and retired, and many young people have left” (Morrison, 2003). However, over the next decade, Pittsburgh re-emerged as a destination city for young adults seeking careers in the growing high tech and information systems sectors. The availability of attractive and affordable housing made Pittsburgh an appealing place to live and raise a family. A 2017 report noted that the city was “experiencing a resurgence of young people moving to the city or remaining after graduating from one of its colleges and universities” (ONEPGH, 2017). A comparison of census data from 2007-11 and 2012-16, indicated increases of 21% and 32% respectively in the population of young adults, ages 22-34, residing in Squirrel Hill, and the North and South neighborhoods of the city (University Center for Social & Urban Research, 2018).

The recent Greater Pittsburgh Jewish Community Study (Boxer et al., 2018) found that the Jewish population of greater Pittsburgh has grown by 17% since 2002 and appears to be getting younger. The influx of Jewish young adults to the area has also introduced greater diversity. In particular, there is a growing proportion of Jewish adults who are married to or in committed relationships with non-Jews. The community study found that 29% of all Jewish adults are in an interfaith relationship, but among younger Jews, the intermarriage rate is substantially higher. Among the married or partnered Jewish adults, 40% ages 18-34 and 44% ages 35-49 have a spouse or partner who is not Jewish. The community study’s findings also indicated that one third of interfaith couples have limited participation in the ritual, holiday, and organizational aspects of Jewish life. Although one third of children in interfaith households in Pittsburgh are being raised exclusively Jewish, half are being raised with no religious identity.

This report describes research conducted by the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University for the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh. The study was designed to expand the community’s understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the
burgeoning population of interfaith couples in its catchment communities. Conducted in service to Federation’s goal of becoming a “community of excellence” in its work with interfaith households, the research establishes a foundation of knowledge for the development of programs, policy initiatives, and strategies to encourage and facilitate interfaith couples’ exploration of meaningful Jewish involvement for themselves and their children.

At least half of all marriages by US Jews are to non-Jews, and it has become increasingly important to understand the needs and preferences of these families for involvement in the US Jewish community. Research indicates that many interfaith couples remain at a distance from Jewish communal life, and many children raised in these homes enter their young-adult years with little in the way of Jewish experience or education (Sasson et al., 2015; Shain et al., 2019). At the same time, previous studies suggest that policies and initiatives focused on this population have the potential to alter the trajectories of interfaith families and how they raise their children. For example, millennial children of intermarriage—the first generation born after the Reform movement initiated a strategy of outreach to interfaith households—are substantially more likely to have received Jewish education and to identify as Jewish than children of intermarriage from previous generations (Sasson et al., 2017). Research indicates that outreach strategies successfully changed the culture of many Jewish institutions to one of welcoming and acceptance of interfaith couples. A qualitative study of Reform-affiliated synagogues in the early 2000s found that intermarried couples felt comfortable in these congregations and that synagogue membership grew more diverse after the initiation of outreach efforts (Chertok et al., 2001).

This study examined the Jewish needs and interests of interfaith couples in Greater Pittsburgh within the context of their full life experience. Grounded in couples’ animating concerns and desires for themselves and for their children, the study addressed the following research questions:

- **Plans for raising children**: How are couples thinking about the religious identity and education of their children? What options for formal and informal Jewish education are they aware of and what are their thoughts about these options?
- **Awareness of and satisfaction with existing offerings**: In what ways, if any, do current programs, activities, and institutions of the Greater Pittsburgh Jewish community engage with and enhance the lives of interfaith couples and their children?
- **Gaps and opportunities**: What needs of these families remain unmet? What types of programs or opportunities would be of most interest to this group?
- **Program content preferences**: What program content areas are most attractive to members of interfaith households? For instance, do they prefer educational, social, cultural, or religious programming?
- **Program format preferences**: What are the logistical or structural characteristics of programs and opportunities that are most attractive to members of interfaith households? For instance, do they prefer specialized opportunities for similar couples or programming that is open to a heterogeneous group? Are they more likely to relate to professional clergy or educator-led programs, or to volunteer or lay-led programs?
We begin with a brief description of the research methodology and the demographics of the couples studied. The report continues with a discussion of the current landscape of programmatic offerings for interfaith couples with a focus on potential gaps and barriers in the system. The report then focuses on the experiences of interfaith couples with specific attention to their sense of welcome in the Jewish community, points of entry to their Jewish engagement, and the relevance of life stage for their primary concerns and needs. The report concludes with suggestions for new or expanded programs and policy that reflect interfaith couples’ logistical preferences along with their realities and needs.

**Methodology**

The findings described in this report are based on interviews with interfaith couples and key informants. Qualitative research strategies, such as those employed in this study, are particularly valuable when the goal is to learn about how a group understands and experiences a particular phenomenon. These methods are well suited to capturing the nuance of phenomenon and their cultural context. Careful sampling and systematic coding of data ensure that the findings gathered through qualitative methodology are generalizable.

**Key informant interviews.** We interviewed 15 key informants about their perspectives on the Jewish community’s engagement efforts with interfaith couples. These individuals represent 10 Jewish organizations with a presence in greater Pittsburgh, including synagogues and minyanim, community centers, day schools, and various departments of Federation. These key informant interviews were used to develop an understanding of the landscape of existing services for interfaith couples, to aid development of interview protocols, and to explore potential policy recommendations.

**Interviews with interfaith couples.** We interviewed 29 couples comprised of a Jewish partner and a partner from a different religious background. The target sample for this study consisted of committed couples with one Jewish and one non-Jewish partner that currently reside in the Greater Pittsburgh area. Couples eligible to be interviewed either did not have children or had no children older than age five. Couples where one partner had already converted to Judaism were not considered interfaith and were not eligible for the study, while couples where one partner was in the process of conversion, and the other partner was already Jewish by birth or conversion, were considered interfaith and eligible. Interviews were conducted between March and June 2019. When possible, couples were interviewed together. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, and were conducted over the phone. Couples participating in an interview received a $40 Amazon giftcard as compensation.

To reach couples that do not already have extensive connections to Jewish life in the Pittsburgh area, we employed a variety of recruitment channels. Members of an advisory panel of interfaith couples distributed recruitment messages through their personal, professional, and neighborhood networks. Local Jewish organizations, including PJ Library, Repair the World, Community Day School, and both JCCs disseminated recruitment messages to their contact lists and social media followers. The Conservative, Reform, and non-denominational congregations were asked to share information about the study with their membership with the aim of reaching local young interfaith
couples through their parents and extended family. The study also employed snowball sampling, meaning that couples that were interviewed were asked to recommend other couples that met the study criteria.

**Characteristics of Interviewed Couples**

The ages of those we interviewed ranged from the late 20s through the early 40s. The majority (17) were in their 30s, with four individuals in their 20s and nine individuals in their 40s. The majority (25) of couples interviewed were married (Figure 1). Three of the unmarried couples were engaged, with one describing themselves as in a committed relationship, although they had no current plans to marry. The length of the couples’ relationships spanned 2-15 years with 13 couples being together for less than 10 years and 16 couples together for 10 years or more. Two couples were same-sex, and six identified as multi-racial or multi-ethnic.

The predominant current religious identification of the non-Jewish partners was Christian (16), with 10 non-Jewish partners identifying as Catholic. Nine of the non-Jewish partners did not identify with any religious group, and three described themselves as having a non-Christian religious identity, such as Hindu or Muslim.

The majority (18) of couples interviewed had at least one child (Figure 2). Two couples were expecting their first child at the time of the interview.
The couples interviewed resided in a wide range of Pittsburgh area communities (Figure 3). Six couples lived in the traditional Jewish neighborhood of Squirrel Hill. An additional 13 couples lived elsewhere in the city of Pittsburgh, but outside of Squirrel Hill. Ten of the interviewed couples lived in suburban communities, with six couples living in the North Hills and four couples living in other suburban communities, including the South Hills.

In terms of their length of residence in the Pittsburgh area, 17 couples included at least one partner who was raised locally, whether it was the Jewish or the non-Jewish member (Figure 4). Eight couples had lived in Greater Pittsburgh for five years or less.
Points of Entry
Findings

The Landscape of Offerings for Interfaith Households

The experiences of interfaith families are embedded within the larger Jewish community context, and in particular are influenced by the approaches of communal institutions and decision makers. In this section, we explore the array of resources available to interfaith couples and consider how Jewish institutions perceive the needs and inclinations of this population. We start by considering the programmatic gaps and institutional assumptions that uniquely affect interfaith couples, and then turn to those that affect young Jewish households, both inmarried and intermarried.

Missing infrastructure for interfaith outreach

One of the approaches to understanding human systems is to consider the manner and extent to which strategic priorities are mapped onto the formal structure of an organization and reflected in functional areas, roles, and collaborative work (Bolman & Deal, 1984). Honeymoon Israel, PJ Library, OneTable, and Repair the World operate in the Pittsburgh area and successfully attract interfaith couples to their programming. Nonetheless, our key informant interviews with communal professionals and our exploration of local programming initiatives reveal that in Pittsburgh there are few to no organizations, initiatives, or staff explicitly tasked with engaging intermarried households.

Federation has no personnel with interfaith outreach as an explicit part of their portfolios. In part, this reflects the assumption (described below in greater detail) that interfaith families should not be treated any differently than inmarried ones. However, the lack of dedicated staff also means that no one is responsible for making sure that Federation-funded or initiated programs successfully attract interfaith couples, or that there is a comprehensive and accessible array of programs to meet the needs of this population. Some of the Federation professionals we spoke with have recognized this gap, especially after comparing themselves to the central Jewish organizations in similar communities.

One of the strategies that federations in other communities have taken to promote outreach to interfaith families has been to model and communicate guidelines for using appropriate and welcoming language on organization
websites and print materials. A review of the Pittsburgh community’s 17 non-Orthodox synagogue websites found only five with language on their homepages explicitly welcoming interfaith families to the congregation. Another six do include this language but elsewhere on the site [not on the homepage]. Two synagogue websites highlight generic language about welcoming everyone, but do not explicitly reference interfaith families. Four synagogues do not use welcoming language anywhere on their websites.

The importance of including an explicit welcome of interfaith families was brought home in our interviews with couples. Two interviewees mentioned specifically looking for a synagogue community that would embrace them as an interfaith family. The synagogue website was the pivotal first place they checked.

[The temple’s] website is easy to navigate and it is very clearly welcoming to interfaith families. They make it very obvious on their website that they welcome interfaith couples in their space. (Non-Jewish partner)

I went online searching for a Reform synagogue in the North Hills that [was] accepting of interfaith families…We ended up finding this synagogue that was Reform and that accepted interfaith families—not only accepted, but embraced. (Jewish partner)

One result of the lack of explicit guidelines and Federation portfolios dedicated to the interfaith population is that there is a limited array of offerings for those wishing to learn more about Judaism or Jewish living. Few programs exist, and they are not offered on a predictable schedule. Individual or pairs of synagogues may offer introduction to Judaism classes (as well as conversion classes), but these are scheduled episodically. When programs do exist, they are often difficult to access. Without a centralized online platform for learning about these programmatic options, the onus falls on interested couples to check offerings synagogue by synagogue. One key informant, not affiliated with a synagogue, acknowledged that synagogues “are not prominent in their outreach… they don’t advertise [intro classes] as such.” Although some programs for young couples and families, such as Honeymoon Israel and PJ Library, may alert their participants and alumni of local offerings, non-participants are unlikely to be connected to their listservs or social media.

Preference for Providing Integrated versus Specialized Programming

There is a widespread assumption among Jewish communal professionals in the Pittsburgh area that interfaith couples and families are not interested in targeted programming. Key informants expressed concern that programming specifically for interfaith couples would make them feel stigmatized and a less valid part of the Jewish community. As one key informant put it: “we got rid of targeting our programming in order not to single people out.” Another said: “we serve them best by giving them the core tools and the core knowledge that we give to the Jewish community generally.” On the one hand, this approach has contributed to the feeling (described in more detail below) of welcome that many interfaith couples experience in local Jewish organizations. And, on the other hand, the assumption that the challenges and issues faced by interfaith couples are no different from those of other couples means that their unique needs have not been addressed in programmatic offerings.
These assumptions, however, have started to shift among some within Pittsburgh’s Jewish professional world. There has been growing recognition that interfaith couples want to be treated like everyone else, but also have specific concerns that they would like to see addressed. Our interviews with interfaith couples echoed this sentiment. Specifically, many couples expressed a desire to get to know and learn from other couples like themselves.

We’ve met a lot of people similar to us since we moved here. You know, mixed—one is Jewish—but they chose to raise their kids in Squirrel Hill. So we’ve been kind of taking some cues from some friends of ours too. It seems like there’s a lot of us in the same boat. (Jewish partner)

There’s a lot of things that are helpful for us to discuss with other people or learn maybe about how other people have done it [raised children in an interfaith home]. (Non-Jewish partner)

Some couples mentioned a specific need to find similar couples to learn from about how to discuss difficult topics, including how to approach building an interfaith family or navigating the Christmas holiday with non-Jewish family. Couples with children were particularly interested in learning how other couples navigate issues related to raising children with a Jewish religious identity. And in fact, some couples did mention groups for interfaith parents at their synagogues.

At that point [after a disagreement over a Christmas tree], that was when I was starting to feel really starved for community, where I felt like there are other people in this city, in this country, who have done what we are doing, and like they’ve all found different ways to talk about it. I think that was also part of what led us to [synagogue]. Because on their website, they referenced an interfaith group that they had at the synagogue that I thought if there was programming, we could meet [interfaith couples]. (Non-Jewish partner)

Just having some of those hard conversations and seeing how people are approaching it, because you can look online all you want, but actually talking to somebody about it is a lot better. (Non-Jewish partner)

Well I guess it would be nice to have some sort of group where we could talk about raising kids in an interfaith home and then bouncing ideas, what ways to do it. I think we don’t really know. It can be confusing on the kid, confusing for us, so that could be helpful. (Jewish partner)

One of the reasons we joined our synagogue is because they’re really open to interfaith families. And they do have an interfaith potluck every so often. I’m hopeful that maybe once we’re able to go more that I might have people to have those conversations with. We don’t know other interfaith families that are definitely raising them Jewish, but one parent who’s not Jewish. That’s one thing I definitely feel is lacking. I’m always on the lookout but I just haven’t run into families like ours. (Non-Jewish partner)

Institutional Assumptions about Why Interfaith Couples Do Not Participate

We spoke with several Jewish professionals in Pittsburgh whose central assumption is that interfaith couples do not engage with Jewish life because they are not interested. One professional told us that “the people who aren’t coming [to Jewish programs] just aren’t interested in religious life or Jewish identity for their family. They’re finding meaning or community elsewhere.” Speaking about the community as a whole, another key informant commented that Jewish organizations seem to be focused primarily on the lower-hanging fruit as far as outreach to the intermarried:

There are two profiles: the couple that is just waiting to be grabbed up by whatever we can offer, and the couple that we’ve lost, who married out and clearly don’t want anything to do with Judaism. We’re all competing for the first couple, but none of us are trying to figure out what do with couple two.
The assumption that interfaith couples have no interest in Jewish engagement has stifled experimentation with different approaches to this population.

**Living Outside of Squirrel Hill is Seen as a Rejection of the Jewish Community**

Repeatedly, key informant interviewees told us that when couples, regardless of who their partner is, choose to live outside of Squirrel Hill it is tantamount to a declaration that they do not want to affiliate with the Jewish community.

_We have couples who have chosen to live in Wexford and far away from the center of Jewish communal life…they have put themselves at a distance from Jewish communal life._

Our interviews with couples suggested a very different set of motivating forces for seeking residence outside of Squirrel Hill. Many couples described logistical concerns including housing prices, length of commute to work, proximity to family and friends, and the quality of local public schools. Other couples described their preference for suburban rather than urban living as a primary driver in their search for a residence.

_We wanted to limit [the commute to work] to within an hour of…where we are in the North Hills._ (Non-Jewish partner)

_My mom really wanted us to move to Squirrel Hill because she thought [Non-Jewish partner] would be really comfortable there because of the density, the commercial density, but the apartments were just awful._ (Jewish partner)

_We had looked to rent a house in Squirrel Hill. It was pretty expensive. And so we were like, we could probably buy a house if we have that kind of money._

_So we started looking, and Greenfield was the slightly cheaper sibling of Squirrel Hill. It’s a neighborhood away. It’s still close to all of the things that we cared about. We knew that it was safe and the school was good._ (Jewish partner)

_Aspinwall has a really walkable feel, it’s still on the bus line, which is great. It’s in a much better school district, so by crossing the bridge we actually are in a different school district. That was a big part of it as well. Another thing is the housing, we could afford it a lot more than living actually in the East End, where we would have needed a couple million dollars to buy a house. So affordability, school districts, but still urban walkable feel that we were getting when we were living in the East End._ (Non-Jewish partner)

_We would have probably lived in Squirrel Hill if we could have afforded to. The further you move out from the city, the more house you can get for your money. Definitely school district, and being close to our families. We have a great neighborhood and that definitely is a big factor._ (Jewish partner)

_Some Jewish partners who were raised in the suburbs of other cities expected those of Pittsburgh, especially those with well-regarded public school systems, to have the same type of thriving Jewish community that they experienced during their childhoods. Rather than seeking to escape the Jewish community, these couples expected to find it in the suburbs and were surprised to find that this was not the case._

_I always had the impression that Pittsburgh was like a good Jewish population. Then I realized after we moved here it’s really limited to Squirrel Hill. Right where we live, I feel like it’s no Jewish people. Our temple is 25 minutes away._ (Jewish partner)
Pittsburgh’s Suburbs Afford Limited Jewish Opportunities
Writing about the geographic distribution of Jewish households in the Pittsburgh area, historian Barbara Burstin (2019) noted that “Unlike Jews of other cities that are, in one way or another, comparable (say, Philadelphia, Chicago, or Cleveland), Pittsburgh’s Jews never moved en masse to the suburbs.” As a result of this demographic history, there is only a limited physical or institutional presence of the Jewish community in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. The South Hills includes a Jewish Community Center and several synagogues, while the North Hills area is served by two synagogues. The South Hills Jewish Pittsburgh program is housed within the JCC and offers programs both at the JCC location and at area synagogues.

As Jewish families, including those that are interfaith, move to these areas, especially the North and South Hills, they recounted challenges in locating Jewish neighbors or finding local options for engaging in Jewish life.

“Our house] was close to where our parents lived and where we met. That’s where we moved. We would definitely want to stay out east in the suburbs, just because this is where we grew up. But the issue is we’re far removed from any sort of community that we really want to be a part of just because of where our home is placed. That’s something that I would love to have but is not here. (Non-Jewish partner)

Newcomers Encounter Challenges Integrating into Pittsburgh Social Life
The Pittsburgh Jewish community has historically not been a transient community. Nearly three quarters of the Jewish population has lived in Pittsburgh for 20 years or longer, and 22% of those individuals have lived their entire lives in Pittsburgh. Furthermore, about one third have parents who also live in Pittsburgh (Boxer et al., 2018).

Many newcomers to Pittsburgh struggle with integrating into the community, even without the barriers that can come with being part of an interfaith family. As one key informant told us, “the outsiders feel like the insiders should be welcoming, but the insiders feel the outsiders need to reach out.” We heard from multiple professionals that they were happy to passively welcome newcomers into communal spaces, but there did not seem to be a recognition that active outreach was also necessary. As a member of one couple recounted, they can feel ostracized as a member of an interfaith family, but also because they are seen as “outsiders” among native Pittsburghers:

I didn’t quite feel as welcomed as maybe I thought I would be [at a synagogue]. I wasn’t, like, part of that community, but there was a lot of questions and sort of like little side comments and things like that. Honestly, that was probably the only time that I’ve ever felt that way. They’re more conservative and they sort of grew up there, and I was an outsider. (Non-Jewish partner)

I never felt welcomed with open arms and oh, everybody wants to be our friend. We haven’t had that experience here. In trying to explore synagogues in the area or something, the networks already seem formed and established. And it’s hard to just butt in or shove your way in. (Non-Jewish partner)

The Experiences and Perspectives of Interfaith Couples

Most Couples Perceive Jewish Organizations as Welcoming of Interfaith Households
Although newcomers to Pittsburgh may find it challenging to break into long-established social networks, couples told us that, for the most part, any lack of welcome they experienced was not due to their being
interfaith. Quite the contrary, most couples described being welcomed into Jewish organizations and programs. The experiences of both Jewish and non-Jewish members of these households were largely positive, and they appreciated the warm reception they received.

*I actually can’t think of a single experience where somebody overtly, even a little bit, made me feel unwelcome.* (Non-Jewish partner)

*I felt very welcome from everybody. Incredibly welcome.* (Non-Jewish partner)

Some Jewish partners were, frankly, surprised by the level of acceptance they have experienced. Based on how they witnessed interfaith couples being treated in the synagogues where they were raised, they did not expect to be welcomed with open arms.

*My experience from a kid was that we wouldn’t have been welcomed, we would’ve been judged and questioned and that type of thing. But seeing what I’m seeing, I’m wondering if that may not be the case anymore.* (Jewish partner)

Some non-Jewish partners worried that their acceptance might be conditional or superficial. They recounted being warmly received in Jewish programs, but they were also concerned that they or their children were thought of differently or more negatively than inmarried couples and their children. Nonetheless, this ongoing concern had not kept these families from engaging in Jewish life and programming.

*I’ve never felt unwelcome. I’m always acutely aware that I’m not Jewish, at gatherings of any size, whether it’s at synagogues for High Holidays or a Shabbat dinner or whatever. I’m not Jewish, it’s why I don’t know lots of things. But I’ve never felt unwelcome.* (Non-Jewish partner)

I think some of it is in my head, feeling like, oh, should I really be here? I’m not Jewish, everybody else is Jewish, what are they thinking of me, what do they think of me being here? Especially given that Judaism is usually rooted in the mother. I’m not Jewish. Do people think my kids aren’t really Jewish, are they secretly rolling their eyes? I definitely have a lot of internal monologue of how much do I really belong here and what do people think of me being here. (Non-Jewish partner)

Although most of the couples we interviewed felt welcomed into Jewish organizations, some had a very different experience. One interviewee mentioned becoming involved in a Jewish organization and contacting it. She recounted that, “I never heard back from them. That was probably the only time that I went out of my way there to do anything.” Other couples felt their presence or behavior in Jewish spaces were negatively evaluated. Whether intentional or not, experiences like these can leave interfaith families feeling cautious about engaging with the Jewish community.

*At one service we went to, they just put a yarmulke on my kid’s head. And when I took it off there was judgment, and there were comments made, and I’ve really never felt comfortable in that setting since. And I haven’t really felt comfortable with that rabbi since either.* (Non-Jewish partner)

For some couples, the topic of conversion of the non-Jewish spouse raised concerns. For both Jewish and non-Jewish partners, any suggestion or expectations regarding conversion from the community or their family felt judgmental and intrusive. Many non-Jewish partners described themselves as already feeling a part of the Jewish community without a formal conversion.
I never felt unwelcome. I did feel some expectation to convert, especially after we got engaged, and that has never been in my plan. They probably didn’t even recognize what they were saying when they said it, but it really kind of stuck with me like, ‘oh, when are you going to convert?’ And I’m like, ‘I’m not.’ It’s not that I felt unwelcome, but I do feel there were some expectations. (Non-Jewish partner)

Some interfaith couples also recounted their concern that they faced additional barriers to acceptance due to their racial/ethnic identities. Although these families had not experienced overt instances of not being welcome, they felt wary and wanted to be sure that they and their children would not be subjected to rejection.

When you’re interfaith and interracial, it’s a lot harder. (Non-Jewish partner)

We need to figure out what fits for us, what that is, because…we have a different background than others and our children are mixed, so they look mixed, they cannot pretend to be one or the other, it’s very clear. Having them be in a community where they might be the only one, we certainly don’t want that to be their experience. (Non-Jewish partner)

Interfaith Couples are not Averse to Affiliation with Jewish Institutions

Contemporary young adults are often characterized by their disconnection from conventional institutions (Levine, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014) and their skepticism of organized religious life (Greenberg, 2005). Jewish communal leaders, like their peers from other faith communities have noted “the seeming absence of an entire age cohort from organized religious life” (Belzer & Miller, 2007). Interviews with Pittsburgh-area interfaith couples paint a slightly different picture of their disposition toward Jewish institutions and organized Jewish life.

Almost half of the couples we spoke to (13 out of 28) mentioned involvement in a local synagogue. Another six couples mentioned some current or past participation in Federation programming or Shalom Pittsburgh.

Many of the couples we interviewed described themselves as not currently very active in Jewish organizations but noted that they were not averse to future involvement. Couples with few or no institutional affiliations framed their lack of participation as being the result of the demands of career and families rather than on a distaste for religious organizations. As one Jewish partner put it, “It’s just something we haven’t figured out yet.”

I hate to say it, but boy it just comes down to there’s only 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week. And my job is very demanding, I probably work, you know, 55, 60 plus hours a week, every week, and I’ve done it for 12 years. [Non-Jewish partner] works full time, has a very demanding job, and she’s a grad student and we have kids…and it’s just…how much stuff…it’s just finding the time and the mental capacity to do it. That’s not a satisfying answer because it’s an important thing. But it’s the truth. (Jewish partner)

At the same time, some couples described wanting Jewish community and content but were less open to affiliating with Jewish religious institutions such as synagogues. Their preferences were for non-religious options in the Jewish community. For example, one Jewish partner described her commitment to social justice work sponsored by a Jewish organization.

If we want to join something, we want it to be more of a social aspect such as [a] JCC, than [a] synagogue with religion. (Jewish partner)
I would certainly welcome the opportunity or the outlet to learn secular Hebrew or learn some of the history of Israel or any of those other things…without needing to put on a yarmulke or daven or say a prayer, that just don’t exist. I want to have conversations about Judaism and learn more. I just don’t want to do it in such a prescribed manner. (Non-Jewish partner)

What’s so interesting is that when we talk to lots of our peers, nobody is really inspired by the Jewish institutions here. There are people who essentially the only reason they belong to a synagogue, is so they can send their kids to the daycare there, they have no connection to the place. (Non-Jewish partner)

**Effective Points of Entry to Jewish Engagement**

Our conversations with interfaith couples suggested that there are several factors that can boost a household’s participation in local Jewish life. Most notably, having Jewish extended family that live in the area and/or the enrollment of children in Jewish daycare or preschool can serve as a doorway to other forms of participation in Jewish life and community.

**Local family as a point of entry:** Many of the couples interviewed had local Jewish family connections in the Pittsburgh area. These couples often described the ways in which this extended family served as a portal into local Jewish life. Family members “curated” Jewish programming options, informing couples of opportunities that might be particularly attractive. Several couples recounted that family members alerted them to high-quality Jewish childcare options, and one non-Jewish parent told us that it was through her in-laws that she found out that her child could skip to the head of the waiting list at a synagogue daycare if she and her husband became members. Among those who grew up in Pittsburgh, their families’ long ties to the Jewish community made it easier for them to know about and access local Jewish resources, including participation in synagogue programming, before they, themselves, become members.

We don’t technically belong to the synagogue, but it’s the one that I grew up in and my mom worked there for a long time. (Jewish partner)

My sense is that part of why our welcome [back into Pittsburgh] was so warm was around people knowing my family…We’ve benefited in a lot of ways from the fact that my siblings are here and they’re engaged, my parents are here and they’re engaged. We have a big social network here that is largely engaged in the Jewish communities. (Jewish partner)

Having family nearby also increased opportunities to engage in Jewish home rituals and celebrations. One non-Jewish husband described how meaningful it was to him to help his Jewish mother-in-law prepare the Passover seder. Many told us that the homes of their Jewish family were where their Jewish life takes place.

I keep thinking about Passover. Being able to find what I can give in that space and time and give with some measure of quality without screwing things up for other people, that’s been a pretty significant entry point and foothold in my engagement with Judaism and its celebrations and culture. It’s evolved into a very safe space for me, a place where I feel very comfortable, that whole holiday food and the preparation and all that, I feel extremely satisfied with that really. (Non-Jewish partner)

Being Jewish is about being with my family. We went over to my parents for the first seder. I went over for Hanukkah with [child]. We stopped by on Sukkot. We go almost every Shabbat. (Jewish partner)
Jewish childcare as a point of entry: One of the themes that emerged in interviews was the important role that Jewish childcare, starting in infancy, played as an entry point to Jewish life and community. Couples often described selecting a Jewish daycare based on its reputation for quality. Although their initial decision was not predicated on the Jewish aspects of the program, over time, these parents came to appreciate that their Jewish childcare center led them into relationships with other parents raising Jewish children. Non-Jewish partners credited their positive experiences with Jewish childcare centers as providing a way to connect with and feel more comfortable with Jewish traditions.

A lot of our friendships have formed through our kids and our kids are at the JCC, so just through other parents that we’ve met at the JCC who we are now friends with, and you’d playdate, and have over, you’d go over to their house. When we moved to Pittsburgh four years ago, we applied to a bunch of daycares, and the JCC was at the top of our list. I think that actually really helped me start to feel more comfortable. I didn’t grow up around Jewish people at all, I mean I had barely even heard of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But I think having kids in the JCC helped me start to feel more comfortable with the holidays and the customs. (Non-Jewish partner)

Through their involvement in Jewish childcare programs, some families have found their way into other Jewish experiences including the celebration of Shabbat or PJ Library.

The Shababa Baba is like the number one greatest way that they have been welcoming to young families. And the most wonderful thing is that there are a lot of non-Jewish, families from the preschool that come regularly because it’s part of the school community as much as it’s part of the synagogue community. (Jewish partner)

I mean honestly you wonder if we would be doing Shabbat dinners, and if we would be as involved in our Jewish community if it wasn’t for the daycare. (Non-Jewish partner)

Evolving Perspectives on Raising Children

Research on normal family development suggests distinct stages in the development of young couples, each of which involves navigating unique challenges and areas of growth and change (McGoldrick & Carter, 1982). Our previous research indicates that the decisions and needs of young interfaith couples also shift during the early years of their partnership (Chertok et al., 2019).

Before having children: Our interviews with Pittsburgh-area interfaith couples suggest that couples’ views about raising children evolved over the course of their relationship. Couples told us that their early conversations about how, and if, they would have children were often hypothetical.

You know, we met when we were barely 22, we were about to turn 22. At that age there was sort of course we’ll have kids, it’s the conversation to have, 10 years later it’s definitely more ambivalent. (Jewish partner)

As they started to envision a future together, some couples explicitly explored “deal breakers” that would indicate an insurmountable difference in their thinking. For instance, several couples described discussions early on in which the Jewish partner made clear that future children would be raised Jewish. Agreement to this stipulation by the non-Jewish partner was necessary for the relationship to proceed.
There’s definitely been, less conversations and more issuing of expectations, like if there are kids, they will be raised Jewish. Do you consent to that or not, because if you don’t, that’s a wrap. I consented. (Non-Jewish partner)

We talked about we definitely were not raising them Christian. (Non-Jewish partner)

Some couples told us that even when they became serious about each other they did not broach the subject of how their future children would be raised. Some indicated that they would not really be ready for that discussion until they actually had children. Even when couples had made a decision to raise future children Jewish, it was very unusual for them to have a clear idea of what that path would entail.

It [being raised Jewish] means they will predominantly, I’m hoping identify as Jewish, you know, go to Hebrew school. I guess the plan will be to bar mitzvah them but not to be exclusive that they can’t celebrate holidays with [Non-Jewish partner]’s family too. (Jewish partner)

I would want my kids involved in a shul from a very early age, not one of these situations where they approach, nine, ten and all of a sudden it’s like, okay, almost time for your bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, now you have to go figure this out, care about it, even though we have not modeled caring about it for the last umpteen years. So that’s pretty important to me. I like ritual and I like holidays. Not necessarily tradition. (Jewish partner)

Welcoming children: The transition to being parents marks a substantial change in the life of a couple. Interfaith couples we interviewed often told us that they did not have networks of other new parents to turn to as they navigated the transition to parenthood. Local family often filled this gap and served as mentors and role models, but there were few inputs for thinking about the development of the Jewish identity of their new child.

We actually did a prenatal course at a holistic-place, they did yoga and all these things. That was very helpful as well. We only had one friend at the time, I think, that had a kid. It was really my stepsister and her husband that were sort of the biggest help for us in terms of preparing. (Non-Jewish partner)

We did an intro to Judaism course, but even then we were like, we don’t really know what we’re doing about religion when it comes to this baby. And I don’t—I don’t think we like stuck our head in the sand, I think we just genuinely didn’t know how we would feel. (Jewish partner)

One of the first decisions that new parents make is what, if any, rituals they will use to welcome their child. Couples can face a difficult conversation regarding whether or not they will circumcise their male children and whether the circumcision will be performed in a medical versus religious setting. Several couples told us that they decided to separate the medical procedure from the religious ceremony for male children. Many families planned for a bris or naming ceremony on their own schedule rather than following the traditional timing of a bris or naming ceremony.

So [Non-Jewish partner] would prefer the circumcision to happen at a hospital which my family, and I’m somewhat okay with. Right now we’re planning to use a local midwife center, and they do not do circumcisions or bris’ there. In that case, he is fine with a bris, but would like it to be by a doctor and a ceremony later. (Jewish partner)
That’s not even a religious thing, it’s more of I’d rather that happen in the hospital type of thing, if it’s a mohel doing it that’s fine, and I know they do them in the hospital, so that’s not really religious on my end. (Non-Jewish partner)

Couples also struggled to find the right language and welcoming ceremonies that would feel comfortable for everyone, including non-Jewish family members. Under the right circumstances, these ceremonies provided an opportunity for both partners to feel empowered to make Jewish decisions for their new child and for their extended families to feel included in an important milestone in their child’s life. Unfortunately, for some couples, their welcoming ceremony served to highlight their discomfort with the Jewish community and their sense that they did not know enough to make informed decisions.

I honestly, the only place I’ve ever felt [unwelcome] was at our first son’s bris. Some of that was the way it was set up. I mean we had never met the mohel, we didn’t know him. He didn’t speak to me. He didn’t speak to my mother. I was like, whoa, this is not the Judaism I know, but now it’s in my house, and I have a new baby, and this is really intense. (Non-Jewish partner)

But for example, a baby naming for a girl, I wouldn’t be comfortable. You go up there as a couple and then with your parents and do a lot of prayers in Hebrew. And that’s not necessarily something that I would be comfortable with. I feel like [Jewish partner] and his dad would walk up there and be the only ones saying the prayers, and I don’t think it would be as meaningful of an experience for us as a couple because it would be very one sided. (Non-Jewish partner)

Somehow in the seven days after our son was born, we designed his bris with [Jewish clergy]. We’ve been lucky so far to identify people who are willing to work with us in that way. So we had a bris for our son in which there was no discussion of entering a covenant with God. (Jewish partner)

We didn’t really get it together, so we had her baby naming on her first birthday. Our rabbi at [synagogue] was nudging me gently and consistently to make sure that I didn’t skip it. They were so sweet and wonderful because they found ways to include [Non-Jewish partner]’s family in the service to give them little jobs that they could do. They gave my Jewish family jobs that they could do. It was really amazing kind of the way that they handled it, and it was really reassuring to me to know that not only were we being included in the community, but that they were like genuinely supporting us. (Jewish partner)

Parenting preschool-age children: Most of the couples that we spoke to have decided to raise their children Jewish. When interfaith couples described what they want for their children, both Jewish and non-Jewish partners often mentioned the importance of Jewish family celebrations and shared traditions. They want their children to feel embedded in a community and to have family and friends with whom they can share the experience.

I like the traditions. I look back at my childhood and see the things that I did...you know, seders or dinners at Rosh Hashanah. To me there’s more than just a religious aspect to it, it is a family communal thing, and I don’t want to deprive my children of that. (Jewish partner)

The things that were important to them [Jewish grandparents] in terms of their religion and my husband’s...that my kids are familiar and learn those things and continue those traditions, those traditions that we’re maintaining with his family and also building within our own, I think that’s really what I enjoy. (Non-Jewish partner)

I also love the community, and I really love like the tradition, and the fact that I can give traditions to my children that I hope will be meaningful to them when they grow up. I think for me a lot of it is being able to give this to my children and being able to give them Jewish community. (Non-Jewish partner)
Interfaith parents of toddlers and preschool-age children described becoming keenly aware that they would soon have to make decisions about the religious education of their children. They described facing imminent decisions about whether to enroll them in Jewish day or supplementary school and how to reinforce their Jewish identities at home. Some individuals expressed a desire for programs that would help them navigate these decisions.

Maybe a workshop or a series of workshops around Judaism and your family, and the kids have an opportunity to meet other kids, and we get to network with other families and maybe have some guidance from a rabbi or somebody like that. I think that’s something I would enjoy. I think it would be nice to think about more deliberate ways to incorporate the beliefs into our daily lives without feeling like we’re signing up for some religious doctrine… I certainly know that there is value and benefit to them having a more formal religious connection. I think figuring out what that is and where that is, and when that is, is kind of the crossroads that we’re at right now. (Non-Jewish partner)

Even as they are exploring Jewish life, interfaith parents of young children also recounted difficult questions about how they will deal with educating their children about their non-Jewish parent’s religious background and traditions. Parents expressed concern about how to honor the non-Jewish family’s religious traditions without undermining the emerging Jewish identity of their young children.

Are we going to expose the Jewish religion *and* the Catholic religion? We’re starting to get to the point of some of those lessons are coming up. (Non-Jewish partner)

[Child] goes to a Jewish school so he doesn’t really know anything about Christmas. But then we celebrate Christmas with [non-Jewish spouse’s] family. So I think that is going to become more of an issue. I don’t want to call it an issue, but we’ll have to explain that in more detail when he’s older… I would love to speak to somebody about it and how best to handle that, but we haven’t done that yet. (Non-Jewish partner)

So the decision that we made together, after obviously a lot of discussion, is that [Child] is inherently Jewish. She goes to her Jewish preschool, she does the Jewish staff she’ll get bat mitzvahed. But, we are going to support and respect and learn about [Non-Jewish partner]’s family and traditions in a way that’s not shoving it down her throat. So, you know, we probably won’t do much church. But we’ll go over, and we’ll celebrate Christmas because it’s important to them. We’ll go over, and we’ll celebrate Easter because it’s a meal that is important to them, and eventually we’ll explain to her the significance of what those holidays mean to her grandparents and her dad. (Jewish partner)

Several couples described celebrating Jewish holidays in their own home and relegating the enactment of non-Jewish religious traditions to the homes of their non-Jewish extended family.

The Christmas thing is pretty much the only thing we do with my Christian background. Actually my kids like coloring Easter eggs with my parents. They don’t even know that it is a religious thing. They just think it’s fun to do Easter eggs. We’re going to go visit my family in a couple of weeks and [Child] really loves to do an Easter egg hunt. (Non-Jewish partner)

Non-Jewish mothers in heterosexual partnerships often noted that they are the parent in charge of the religious education of their children. This is a phenomenon noted repeatedly in research on child rearing in interfaith households (Bernstein & Fishman, 2015; Fishman & Parmer, 2008; Prell, 2007).
The non-Jewish mothers we interviewed were both surprised and somewhat uncomfortable with this role.

For some strange reason I’m sort of the keeper of the family tradition for Jewish holidays even though I’ve never done one before on my own, but it seemed to work out okay. (Non-Jewish mother)

I actually probably pushed [Jewish partner] to get more involved in Judaism because I was interested, but I just didn’t feel comfortable taking the lead, because it’s not my religion. (Non-Jewish mother)

Impact of the Shootings
The tragic shootings on October 27, 2018 deeply affected the couples we spoke with, both the Jewish and non-Jewish members. Those with long ties to Pittsburgh—especially those who grew up in Tree of Life, Dor Hadash, and New Light congregations—talked about feeling pulled back into community. But even those newer to the area, and those who lived outside of Squirrel Hill, described feeling deeply shaken. Parents talked about fears for their children. More than anything, though, people talked about the deep sense of comfort they sought—and found—in the Jewish community in the aftermath.

After the shooting in Pittsburgh, we were attending more frequently for comfort and solidarity. Um, and yeah, community. I mean, we were just like looking for it. I think it’s dwindled, as the weather was really awful this winter. (Jewish partner)

Right after the Tree of Life shooting, I attended with my daughter a vigil at the synagogue we now belong to. Someone from the board was greeting people at the door, and I stopped and I introduced myself, like ‘we’re not members, but my daughter’s getting named here in a couple of weeks.’ And then I started crying and she, a complete stranger, gave me a big hug. I felt super welcomed and supported during that time. Right after that I was talking to my mom, and she was like, ‘you know, that this is why it’s important to join the temple.’ (Jewish partner)

One thing that stuck with me after the synagogue shooting at Tree of Life, people were not only reaching out to [Jewish partner] but also to me and seeing how we were. I really felt a part of the community in that way, even though I don’t identify as Jewish (Non-Jewish partner)

One couple recommitted to attending synagogue and finding Jewish educational venues for their children after bringing home their baby from the hospital coincided with the timing of the Tree of Life shooting. Like other couples we interviewed, they felt a renewed responsibility for the continuity of the Jewish people.

I don’t know if it was a religious crisis, but I just started to feel a little bit differently about my spirituality and God after the shooting at Tree of Life. But it wasn’t so much the shooting, it was just my…I would always say that my issue with not raising them Jewish was just that I didn’t want to be part of the religion dying out. About like a responsibility to carry on the religion. (Jewish partner)

Some couples saw the aftermath of October 27 through a lens of universalism. In particular, parents who were raising their children with exposure to both parents’ religions tied that goal to the broader project of forging strong ties between Jewish and non-Jewish groups within the general Pittsburgh community.

Since last October, I think that the Muslim faith community here, as well as the Black community, have had a really strong tie to the Jewish community. And that was without pomp and circumstance. It just was. It was really everyone coming together. And I think
that's what I would like to see continue. And I think, it's important for our kids to see that too, that even if we bring them up with a certain belief system, whatever that may be, that that isn't the only belief system, but there are people that may think or believe differently. And it's good for them to have an idea of that so they don't think the world is one size fits all. Because it's not. (Non-Jewish partner)
Recommendations

One of the themes of this report is that there are “points of entry” for interfaith couples into Jewish life in Pittsburgh. Having extended family in the area and children in Jewish daycare centers are two examples of bridges to more Jewish involvement. Notably, points of entry change for couples as they transition from one stage to another in their couplehood. But most importantly, interfaith couples in Pittsburgh are open to exploring Jewish life and community at any life stage.

The efforts of Jewish institutions to make interfaith families feel at home have been largely successful. However, our review of the opportunity landscape for interfaith couples also suggests several limiting factors to Jewish involvement. For those living outside of Squirrel Hill, especially in the suburbs, the paucity of nearby Jewish institutions presents a challenge. The array of introductory education options for interfaith partners is neither comprehensive nor easily accessible, and is almost always offered through synagogues.

The findings of this study represent a starting point for Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh as it pursues becoming a “community of excellence” in its work with interfaith households. We conclude this report with a set of suggestions for next steps in this process.

Create Roles and Collaborations that Focus on the Needs of Interfaith Families

The integration of interfaith families affects the entire Jewish community of Pittsburgh, and addressing that issue requires the attention of multiple Jewish organizations. The process of change, however, is often most effective when it starts from the top. We recommend that Federation take the lead by expanding its organizational structure to include roles and portfolios with an explicit focus on interfaith couples and families. Members of these families should also be recruited to volunteer leadership positions so their voices do not go unheard. We also recommend Federation build a community of practice among the disparate programs and organizations that do—or could—play a role in developing the landscape of opportunities for interfaith couples. This partnership will help to address existing gaps and foster easy access to programs. One product of this collaborative group might be the design of a central online platform.
**Expand Satellite Offerings Outside of Squirrel Hill**

The recent Pittsburgh Jewish population study noted that “The community continues to grow in its traditional enclave of Squirrel Hill, but since 2002, a greater share of newcomers has chosen to live in other areas within the region” (Boxer et al., 2018). To address the needs of the growing population of young interfaith couples residing in the suburbs, we recommend that programming be offered in multiple locations, including at satellite sites in the suburbs. This might include, in suburbs where there is little or no Jewish institutional footprint, siting programs in secular spaces. By providing programming in non-synagogue locations, this approach would have the added value of increasing the comfort level of some interfaith couples.

**Expand Jewish Daycare Options, Especially in the Suburbs**

From our interviews it is clear that one of the most effective gateways to Jewish life is Jewish early childcare. Unfortunately, many suburban communities are unlikely to have sufficient numbers of Jewish households to sustain Jewish childcare centers, and parents are often reticent to use childcare options that are far from their place of residence.

The Pittsburgh Jewish community study indicates that there are more young children with intermarried parents in non-Squirrel Hill neighborhoods of Pittsburgh than in any other region (Boxer et al, 2018). However, these families live close to Squirrel Hill and its multiple Jewish childcare centers. In the North Hills, however, Jewish families are dispersed, and the Jewish institutional footprint is smaller than even the South Hills, where there is a JCC. We recommend that, building upon its ongoing Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative, Federation explore what it would take to expand the number and geographic diversity of Jewish childcare options outside of Squirrel Hill and especially in the North Hills. Alternatively, subsidies toward Jewish childcare for interfaith families might encourage these families to make the extra effort to transport their children to a Jewish childcare option.

**Offer Specialized and Integrated Opportunities**

Interfaith couples appreciate being welcomed into Jewish organizations and the effort that has been made to treating them like other young couples. Indeed, many of the issues they face are exactly the same as those encountered by young Jews married to other Jews. At the same time, intermarried couples face a unique set of decision points as they navigate the upbringing of children and their relationships with their Jewish and non-Jewish extended family. Programmatic strategies need to be developed to address these unique aspects of the interfaith experience. Interfaith couples also want opportunities to meet similar couples to share stories, advice, experiences, and concerns.

**Lead with Content Relevant to Life Stage**

What is most relevant to couples, and what they are most likely to consider attending, are offerings that address the challenges they currently face. As couples transition from one stage to the next, they are often looking for ideas, role models, and mentors and are most open to influence during these liminal moments. The Jewish community has the potential to leverage these moments of change by offering programs specific to non-parents, new parents, and parents of older children.
Speaking for myself, I really struggled when we were young and dating. There was nothing really interesting for young interfaith couples who weren’t either planning to convert or have children right away. (Jewish partner)

For me, just knowing some of the little things about how people interact with the temple and all would make it easier for me. (Non-Jewish partner)

**Offer Diverse Programming in Diverse Spaces**

Many interfaith couples are comfortable with religious content experienced in religious settings but others find this environment to be intimidating or not in keeping with their own stance on religion and worship. Interfaith couples, like many of their inmarried peers, are seeking a diversity of Jewish content including cultural, service, and community building options. Until they are ready to join a synagogue, their preference may also be for programs that are offered in non-religious or even secular spaces.

I did attend this cooking class that was hosted in our synagogue, and I thought that event was fantastic. I came home ranting and raving about how fun it was because I think at our age, the default is always, let’s go get drinks and get dinner and there’s always alcohol involved. I really liked that. It was like a really wholesome, informative event. With no pressure. It was just really easy going. And I feel like that was just a really pleasant environment to be in. (Jewish partner)

The recent growth in the Jewish community of Pittsburgh provides Jewish institutions with an exciting opportunity. At the same time, the growing demographic and geographic diversity of the local Jewish population presents certain challenges. In keeping with the best practices of “design thinking” (Kelley, 2001), we have endeavored to understand the perspectives of interfaith couples as a first step in developing offerings that will address their needs, respect their concerns, and spark greater involvement in the Jewish community.

I think it could be less intimidating for people maybe actually having some dedicated programming outside of the synagogue. I think it’s a challenge to get younger people in the doors of synagogues anyway, but maybe something at the JCC or through the Federation out in the world that’s not necessarily a religious space. (Jewish partner)
Notes

1 We use the terms “interfaith” and “intermarried” to refer to couples in which one partner is Jewish and the other is not. This includes couples that are married as well as those that are in committed relationships.

2 Not all of the “Pittsburgh natives” had lived there continuously; many moved for college and returned after some years away.

3 Reanalysis, not included in the community study.
References


Chertok, F., Brookner, M.A., & Minkin, R. (2019). *We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it: Life stage and the needs of interfaith couples in Greater Boston.* Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.


