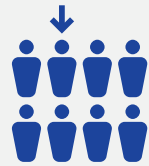


SELECTING WITH INTENTIONALITY

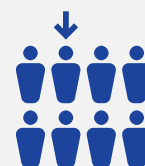
It is important for funders and program operators and designers to consider the ultimate outcome they envision for their initiative. Programs aimed at building independent leaders will be fundamentally different than programs aimed at building interdependent movements. **A great deal of any program's success rests upon the careful selection of participants.** There should be a clear reason for these specific individuals to be brought together. Yet, typical selection criteria may not be setting programs up for their greatest possible impact. Individual development considerations are one aspect. Participant abilities and experiences should be complementary so that they can better learn from the experiences of others and support each other. At the same time, their developmental needs should be similar enough that the content you choose to deliver during the program will be appropriate and beneficial to everyone. If the situation or design precludes similar developmental needs or previous experiences, intentionality in crafting a learning experience that leverages peer mentoring, coaching, or structured peer-learning becomes critical (see DELIVERING POWERFUL CONTENT).

However, developmental characteristics or needs of individual leader participants shouldn't be the only factor to consider with intentional selection. When it comes to network building, considering the role of place (maintaining a geographic focus or explicitly deciding to not limit by geography), sector, experience or managerial level, organizational representation, and other factors may influence selection. Especially with regard to place-based approaches, recent network leadership practitioners⁸ have suggested that operators and funders decenter their assumptions by going to communities and identifying who is trusted, connected, and leading, whether they have the resources or not.⁹ Rather than accept fellows from within the pool of applicants, operators are being pushed to broaden their lens beyond who is simply applying for opportunities to who may have power within the systems they wish to impact.

Selection is of course influenced directly by the recruitment strategies that inform the applicant pool. A typical approach to recruitment is for foundations to put out a call for applicants and then to select from those applicants. This often relies on word of mouth, which is inherently inequitable because those in power and "in the know" may not be representative of the potential applicant pool. Intentional selection may require more intentional recruitment. Learning the community first and identifying the existing network players can ensure that those who already hold power within the network are encouraged to apply. Learning the landscape of the communities also allows the operator's mental model of who is a leader to be expanded and may uncover unconscious biases inherent in the more traditional, unidirectional recruitment process. Moreover, there is an opportunity to recruit an applicant pool that is diverse and representative of the different identity groups relevant to the community(ies) the network or funder/operator wishes to serve. This will enable greater success for systemic change and also build a culture of equitable inclusion of different perspectives and identities in the network.



“The part that [big institutions] have to play is letting go of their status as an institution. So their number one goal cannot be to have people join my institution or contribute to my institution. Their number one goal has to be much broader to say I want people to have a meaningful Jewish experience, period, whether it’s at my institution or another one, or no institution. How can I contribute to the whole? I think that that’s what we’re going to have to all have to do is like give up our piece of, you know, look at the benefit of the whole. And to be less attached to the institution and more attached to the experiences.”



Select to Serve the Network, Not (just) the Program

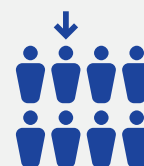
Intentional selection for cohorts should match the intentional outcome(s) for the program. It's true that some of a program's prestige comes from the later accomplishments of alumni, and the program's prestige might even factor into funding decisions (see REDEFINING PRESTIGE). It can be tempting to try to gain prestige by selecting participants who are already accomplished leaders or seem destined for greatness. While accomplished leaders like that may occasionally be a perfect fit for your cohort, it shouldn't be an overriding factor in their selection. Demonstrate your confidence in the transformative power of your program and select leaders that stand to benefit the most from the experience. If field-wide impact is of greater priority than resource winning or dominance, funders should support "building constellations" rather than stars.¹⁰

Similarly, be intentional when deciding whether or not to accept applicants who previously participated in similar programs or fellowships. On the one hand, strive to give opportunities to applicants who haven't had the benefit of similar experiences in the past. They may stand to benefit more or be more open to learning and personal transformation through an experience that will be entirely new to them (see PREPARING LEARNERS). On the other hand, depending on the current state of your alumni network, part of your strategy to support the network might be to help your alumni connect more with the alumni of other networks. In that case, it may be appropriate to discuss with your applicant whether they would be willing to help build bridges between the alumni networks by making introductions or otherwise raising awareness within each network about the other and highlighting areas where interests or needs intersect.

Recognize the Power in Recruitment

The recruitment, application, and selection process is not benign. While selecting to serve the network, it is critical to not lose sight of the individual. Always be thoughtful about the ongoing cycle of how participant competition and selection may affect the network, as well as how participation in the network may affect participants. Also, keep in mind the overall goals you hope to achieve through the program. If the focus is on a specific geographic area – such as building rural leadership, for example – it may serve the overall efforts to select participants who will be more able to collaborate, either because they are focused on the same issue or population or because they are co-located. This may mean that other highly qualified applicants are not selected and that tradeoff is acknowledged in favor of "seeding" a specific area with focused development. That balance becomes easier to navigate in multi-year, repeating cohort efforts, where applicants can be encouraged to reapply or selection focus can be adjusted each cycle and communicated to applicants. For example, if the goal is to provide leadership development to Jewish educators, intentional selection may mean that the funder decides to prioritize a specific developmental focus (such as early childhood), region or state, experience level (new teachers with less than 3 years of experience or aspiring school directors) for selection knowing that there may be other highly qualified candidates, but the focus on certain characteristics may help this specific cohort gain traction more quickly and have a better chance at sustainability.

"I don't think there's a lot of nourishment for Jewish leaders. ... So the idea is that we're always "networking". Like, we're meeting other people for the sake of the work. I'm very interested in human beings and what we need in order to feel love and value, and I'm not sure that the community that I'm part of, in a big sense and in a small sense... knows how to value people for who they are and help them discover and nurture their call. I would say like, for me, I feel like a lot of the work that I do is despite the crap that I get in the community. I feel like there's a big schism between the people who I serve and the like institutional community. ... [My organization] never fit into any bucket in the institutional world, and so there was not a lot of like nurturing, guidance, support, funding, any of those things."



Leverage Vetting Efforts to Support Non-Selected Applicants

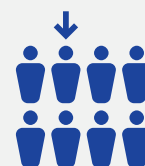
Potential participants who apply to leadership development programs offer a variety of information about their background, passion, and goals for the future. They come with energy and enthusiasm for the work, and engagement in their organization. It is an honor and a privilege to have program applicants (who are the key stakeholders, after all) devote such attention to the promise of a developmental experience. Program organizers review applications and unfortunately, since space in the program is usually limited, may have to turn away some promising applicants. And, even those who aren't selected were individuals who applied because they believe in the power of the program's brand, experience, or network.

To do justice to the process and convene the most suitable cohort possible for your program, you may invest considerable time and effort in reviewing applications and learning about the people who applied. Current processes of recruitment and selection do not leverage the information or energy that applicants provide, or that program designers invest in learning about the cadre of qualified individuals. Don't let their investment, or yours, go to waste. Many existing narratives that decry leader pipeline issues presume that the pipeline is lacking people to fill it versus examining if there are leaks in the pipeline that result in talent going unnoticed (and the biases that might be causing the leaks). The vast amount of information provided through the application process is a potential antidote to pipeline woes.

A best practice is to find a way to keep non-selected applicants engaged even if they aren't selected. Applicants to a program may feel disheartened at not being accepted. In the worst-case scenario, they may lose some of the excitement they felt when imagining themselves in the program and envisioning how it would help them contribute to the Jewish social sector thereafter. Aside from this impact on the individual leader, what might that ultimately do to a budding network and how might we support the broader constellation of talented leaders?

One way you can help surplus applicants hold on to their excitement is to redirect promising applicants to other developmental opportunities. Maintaining contact with them through a mailing list or notifying them first once a new program application opens up can signal your continued interest. The methods for supporting non-selected applicants will have to be balanced of course by the number of applicants, the capacity of the operator/funder and the goals of the larger initiative for the network. If capacity permits, this might include scheduling a follow-up coaching conversation, matching them with an appropriate mentor, or recommending them to a priority waitlist shared among several different cohort programs. If you have no capacity to follow up in those ways, you might offer to create a social media group (or similar) connecting all of the applicants you wish you could have accepted as an independent cohort. Then share some educational materials or activities for the group to engage with on their own or together. This option has lower costs, honors your surplus applicants, and opens avenues for them to support each other as a network of highly engaged, impressive leaders who hope to contribute their unique perspectives and abilities to make the world a better place.

“Jewish philanthropies have changed dramatically in the last five years, from what I can tell. ... Large foundations want to have a much closer proximity to and more tactile experiences with what they are funding. They want to play the role of the convener. They want to play the role of the thought leader and innovator. They're thinking about their own legacy and how they are branding their own legacy as they are doing their philanthropy and that's a huge shift. ... And this shift creates a host of challenges, because it can put the foundation in a competitive role with its grantees, in terms of naming and bragging rights for the work and the innovation. It changes the level of trust between funder and grantee. Often the grantees have – because of their expertise doing the on-the-ground work, they've already kind of sorted out what are the best strategies and what aren't going to be most effective. And there's really intellectual power in all of that experimentation and once a funder kind of gets much closer to it, the funder brings certain ideas out of their own needs, that may not have a lot to do with the needs of the constituents being served by the work.”



Other options may include: intentional sharing of applicant pools across programs to coordinate developmental experiences for a larger group of applicants, supporting different delivery modalities such as offering a larger convening to spur network building that encompasses but is not limited to the selected cohort, or providing a virtual experience or access to complimentary materials for applicants while encouraging them to reapply the next year. Non-selected participants are still critical parts of the network and could also provide feedback or interact with products the cohort produces, especially if the opportunity for virtual feedback is provided (low-cost). When the goal shifts to building the network, the recruitment and selection opportunities can begin to take on new forms.

All of these suggestions point to a network challenge that exists for funders of leadership development programs: the challenge of balancing field level priorities with the time and resource commitment required for a cohort-based program, as well as the need to challenge existing mindsets around participant selection and program prestige. Programs can remain competitive and prestigious while coming up with innovative ways to serve the sector overall. Funders, operators, and designers have a role to play in communicating selection criteria as well as considering ways to still support qualified, eager, but not accepted applicants, who often present a wealth of energy and talent that is at risk of disengaging. Funders also have a responsibility – given the commitment and energy that applicants bring, as well as the power differential between applicants and funders – to span organizational boundaries and work together to provide valuable professional development experiences strategically across the sector, rather than solely to further the prestige of the foundation or program.

“One of the problems with all of the kind of national cohort-based leadership is that you bring [together] such a disparate group of people. The power of doing something community-based, which could potentially also serve as a platform for communal change, boy, imagine that. Imagine if we could touch 200 influencers in [a city] over the course of a five-year period. It would change the face of the entire community. That’s exciting. That gives me hope.”

