

Home Away from Home

A Research Study of the Shabbos Experience on the College Campus; A successful model of informal Jewish Education and Identity building

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Today's Jewish Youth are Searching for Meaning

Chabad on Campus operates on over 85 campuses throughout North America. These campuses serve more than 60% of today's college age youth. More than 30% of today's college students attend a Chabad program. Yet, what are the effects of these programs?

Chabad rabbis have extensive experience in designing and implementing Jewish educational experiences. However, until now, there has not been an objective academic evaluation of these programs. This study begins to analyze the educational work of Chabad on Campus.

The specific goals of the study were

1. To create a detailed "portrait" of the Chabad Shabbos dinner – what are its goals and how does it work?
2. To describe its key educational components;
3. To collect information about why students come and how they feel about the experience;
4. To examine five curricular units created by Chabad-Lubavitch for use at these experiences; and
5. To explore the broader potential of this informal educational experience for Jewish identity building with young Jewish adults.

The results of this study offer stimulating insights into Jewish identity formation and innovative educational techniques that can be used by Jewish educators nationwide.

"The Chabad Shabbos experience and this study challenge the common myth that young Jews today are a lost tribe that has drifted from Judaism and is distancing itself from the Jewish people.... This study reinforces the theory that instead of defiantly moving away, the so-called "lost Jew" is seeking something authentically Jewish."

*On any given Shabbos ,some 5,000 Jewish college students participate in a Chabad Shabbos dinner. The majority of these participants are not Orthodox. **Most of these students will neither join Chabad, nor become Orthodox, yet they will go on to have***

stronger ties to the Jewish community, as a whole. This is an outcome worth celebrating – and a result that is worthy of major communal funding.

“Our study clearly points to the fact that the core of this experience is a Jewish experience – a Shabbos experience – and not a Jewish organizational event. It is Shabbos which happens to be conducted effectively by Chabad. Participants can both enjoy and be critical of elements that they don’t like (e.g. non-egalitarianism). The stigma of Chabad does not seem to be a deterrent; the latter seems to be more of a phobia of adult Jewry than students. Finally, the experience does not make participants “Chabadnikim.” There are no indications of massive change of garb, behavior, courses of study, or affiliation as a result of these experiences.”

The Chabad on Campus is successful because it is not trying to build a denomination.

“These young people are in search of a person-centered education – an education that relates to each of them individually as a human being. Most of Jewish life addresses them as a certain kind of generation, or in the name of the Jewish people or Jewish organizations. Contemporary Jewry has de-personalized being a Jew; at a Shabbos dinner in Albany, Ann Arbor, Cambridge, Gainesville and Stanford, you become a person.”

The Chabad educational model has a simple philosophy:

- 1) Each individual person is unique;
- 2) Each individual has the ability to be changed and transformed; and
- 3) Education should be aimed at personal growth and transformation.

The result is a focus on the person and real ownership of experience

“In many ways the personable, charismatic, non-judgmental persona of the rabbi is not only what holds the evening together, but what ensures that students return time and time again. The rabbi represented a real person, living with a real family in a real home. Students felt that they could talk to the rabbi and his wife not just as spiritual advisors, but also as human beings. Having adult respect in such a way was not something that many students experienced in other parts of their campus life.”

As one student put it

“It didn’t really seem to matter if you knew one other person or you knew everyone, as soon as you entered the house it just didn’t matter – you were now welcomed into a much larger family.”

All Jews are one family. As this groundbreaking study shows, this one family model has the potential to transform the landscape of the organized Jewish world.