

Research Questions Surfaced through CASJE Convenings and Conversations

In the last several months, CASJE has devoted significant energy to considering what types of applied research can make a positive contribution to the field of Jewish summer camps. Funders, practitioners and researchers came together at a **Problem Formulation Convening** to consider their shared questions and concerns. The discussion continued in a “**Blogcast**,” a four-day online discussion among leading thinkers in the field of Jewish camping. The discussion received over 1,500 “hits,” and produced a rich and fascinating dialogue.

CASJE’s primary goal in both of these initiatives was to gain a better understanding of core problems that will benefit from a robust program of applied research, and to begin formulating questions that might guide programs of research over time.

These pages summarize the key research questions that emerged from these conversations conducted by dozens of individuals invested in the field. Specifically, two “strands” of potential research were surfaced:

- **Strand #1—“Exploring and Extending the Impact of Camp on the Jewish Lives of Young People”:** Research that aims to understand, intensify and extend the impact and effectiveness of Jewish summer camps.
- **Strand #2—“Exploring Communal and Educational Questions through Camp”:** Research that conceives of Jewish summer camps as settings in which to examine broader questions about Jewish education and Jewish life.

The conversations and questions outlined in this document suggest programs of research with potential to significantly improve the field of Jewish summer camps and to make a broader contribution to Jewish life in North America.

Strand #1 — Exploring and Extending the Impact of Camp on the Jewish Lives of Young People

Researchers, funders and practitioners share a common interest in identifying, measuring, and exploring what contributes to outcomes produced by Jewish camp such as a greater connection to Israel, a deeper commitment to Jewish community and Jewish life, and an enhanced capacity to exercise leadership in Jewish settings. Identifying these outcomes and their sources is not only an intellectual or academic endeavor. The knowledge generated can enable practitioners and funders to better understand what their efforts and dollars are producing and how what camps produce can be extended to greater numbers of young people.

ACCOUNTING FOR AND INTENSIFYING THE MAGIC: Many agree that there is a certain “magic” at Jewish summer camps. Identifying what contributes to this magic is a complicated task. Applied research can help explore and identify what accounts for the magic, and then experiment with how to extend it. Practical research questions in this vein include:

- In what (expected and unexpected) ways does the camp-experience influence the Jewish lives of campers, and over what period of time? What are the links between attending camp and manifestations of Jewish engagement over the life-course?
- What is the optimal length and frequency (what some call “dosage”) of the camp experience in order for children of different backgrounds to develop as engaged Jews?
- What happens to campers who only attend camp for one summer? Do they ultimately experience the same lasting effects of participating in a Jewish summer camp?
- How can the camp experience be intensified for those who are already “part of the system,” attending camps year after year as staff-members or campers?
- Why do some camps seem to have a longer-term impact than others?
- What do the campers themselves think of their experiences at camp? Are there important elements of the camp experience, as perceived by campers, of which researchers and practitioners are unaware?
- How can the professional and social relationships forged between individuals at camp be maximized when camp is not in session?
- We do not yet know why some camp leaders prove so effective as Jewish change agents while others do not. What is the theory of change that leaders of Jewish camps can employ to bring about the organizational changes that will make their camps more effective zones of Jewish learning? What are the critical factors that account for those leadership differences? What critical interventions can help camp leaders turn their camps around?

EXTENDING THE IMPACT OF CAMP: Prior to a family making the decision to send a child to camp, or to a young person deciding to work at a camp over the summer, a number of influences may be at play. Better understanding these influences can lead to measures that extend the impact of Jewish summer camp, a) by helping recruit those not currently involved, and b) by maintaining relationships with those currently involved. Key questions include:

- What are the influences that lead campers to come to camp or become staff members? How can more campers and staff members be recruited?

- Why do some campers decide **not** to come to camp? Why do some young people decide **not** to work at camp?
- What are the factors that contribute to individuals choosing to continue (or not continue) returning to camp and transition to positions of leadership?
- In what ways does what children bring from their home-lives connect to and interact with the camp experience their families have chosen? Is there an ideal match between home background and camp experiences? What does the ideal match look like and how does that work once children go back home?
- A longstanding hypothesis is that camp's impact on Jewish growth and learning is more powerful for those working as camp-staff than for the campers themselves. What accounts for the transition from camper to staff-member, and what might help cultivate this transition in Jewish summer camps, thereby extending their impact?

Strand 2— Exploring Communal and Educational Questions through Camp

Jewish summer camps do not exist in a vacuum. Those who participate in the experience are connected not only to each other but also to other institutions in a number of ways. Two themes may help shed light on camps' influence on the broader community: Camp as a site for case study, and camp as a laboratory.

CAMP AS CASE STUDY: Studying camp as a site for case study views camp as a prime instance of informal Jewish education “done right.” This type of research can aim to understand how camp’s impact can be applied throughout the year, in different institutions across the spectrum of the Jewish community. This research considers what might be learned about the ways in which camp has impact that could have significance for other Jewish educational institutions. Potential research questions include:

- What are some of the defining features of a “successful” Jewish summer camp? How, if at all, can these features be applied elsewhere—to other camps, and to other educational institutions?
- Camps produce gifted educators and valued traditions. When camp is not in session, these positive elements of the camp experience are sometimes felt during the year. One such example is the proliferation of Debbie Friedman’s music. Are there more examples of camps’ power reverberating throughout the year?
- Are there specific examples of year-round educational institutions that have embodied the special components of the camp experience? Are there particular ways to strengthen the relationship between Jewish summer camps and other educational institutions, in order to increase this phenomenon?

CAMP AS A LABORATORY: Jewish summer camps provide an environment in which to study best practices surrounding teaching, learning, and the engagement of teens and young adults. Camp can be a laboratory for testing out practices from which all Jewish educators could learn. Research questions may include:

- What can be learned about the motivation to stretch Jewishly, build Jewish relationships, or problem-solve from practices or experiments at camp?
- What experiments with prayer at camp could provide clues for how to make prayer more meaningful for young people year-round?
- What leadership learning strategies might be tested at camp for application to other settings?

Next Steps

A unique dimension of CASJE's value proposition is that any research it supports must include well-planned mechanisms for practitioner learning and implementation. CASJE nurtures research that can and does make a difference to practice. Where possible, it provides opportunities for practitioner involvement in the formulation of the research questions to be studied.

A study focusing on either of the above questions could be launched following a competitive bidding process or through directly commissioning a research team identified as most likely to complete its assignment effectively. Many of these questions lend themselves to short intensive studies, while others would require a more sustained inquiry over a number of years.