

In 1997-98, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion conducted an extended strategic planning process which was facilitated by a Working Group of eleven representatives of the Faculty, Administration, and the Board of Governors. This process consisted of a protracted self-study which involved a series of focus groups made up of students on each of our campuses, faculty in each location, local groups of alumni, all of our lay leadership, as well as groups of lay leaders from the wider Reform Movement. The findings pointed to the fragmentary nature of the educational experience of many of our students, the lack of integration among the academic, professional and religious components of their learning, and the need to help our students shape a clear

Barth, an experienced facilitator and planner. The Committee was charged with shaping a new core rabbinic curriculum leading to the M.A.H.L. degree which would:

1. Integrate the Judaica knowledge, professional skills learning, and religious growth of our rabbinic students;
2. Better integrate the First Year Program in Jerusalem into the broader curriculum;
3. Enhance the academic growth of our students by raising matriculation requirements in both Hebrew and basic Judaic knowledge;
4. Create a holistic learning experience;
5. Build students' professional skills in counseling, education, leadership training, and synagogue change by establishing new requirements for mentored in-field experiences.

### A. The Planning Process

At the beginning of the Committee's work, extended discussion about the goals of our core curriculum planning took place at the first all-faculty retreat, June 14-16, 1998. The retreat involved 65 faculty members from all our campuses and helped shape the Committee's ongoing deliberations and the methods by which additional faculty input could be garnered.

Following the faculty retreat, the Core Curriculum Planning Committee spent time initially shaping an agenda of the overarching issues that had to be addressed in our planning. It reviewed our Educational Vision for Professional Training, which had been put together as part of the wider strategic planning process, which generated many of

# New Rabbinical Core Curriculum Strengthens Teaching, Learning, and Congregational Impact

by Dr. Norman J. Cohen, Provost

vision for Jewish life. As a result, the Administration of the College-Institute laid out a series of short- and long-term objectives; chief among them was the creation of a new three-year integrating core curriculum for all rabbinical students.

To this end, a Core Curriculum Planning Committee was formed, involving two faculty representatives from each of our campuses, two rabbinical alumni who serve congregations, and two outside consultants, Dr. Mary Boys, the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary and expert in seminary education (see page 15), and Karen

In shaping the new core curriculum with the support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Committee was sensitive from the outset to the challenge of achieving greater unity without total uniformity and of creating a structure that also promotes innovation and the use of the unique resources of each campus. Therefore, in defining the curriculum, the Committee anticipated that it would not prescribe specific syllabi or course outlines, rather, stipulate the areas and subjects to be covered as well as the learning aims and goals for each. Each faculty then would have the autonomy to determine the details of each learning experience and its structure.

the key questions to be answered. At the same time, the Committee reviewed all of the existing academic, cocurricular, and spirituality programs on each of our campuses, as well as current attempts at integrating the academic, professional, and religious growth of our students. In addition, we created an inventory of the curricular models in place in the other Jewish seminaries.

The Committee then had meetings with each of the faculties in New York, Cincinnati, and Los Angeles, gaining input from each on the following key questions:

- How to integrate learning across different academic areas?

- How to integrate personal religious reflection and growth into all that we do?
- What new modes of teaching and assessment should we consider?

At each campus meeting, we also included local rabbinical alumni in the discussions.

At the same time, our National Clinical Education Advisory Committee, chaired by Rabbi Sam Joseph and made up of representatives of our stateside campuses, held ongoing discussions about the clinical educational components of our curriculum. The Committee grappled with the goals, content, and sequencing of the training of four key rabbinical roles: educational, pastoral, liturgical, and communal/organizational. It was recommended that each of these areas have a required in-field mentored experience to

At the second all-faculty retreat in June 2000, which was attended by 74 HUC-JIR professors and academic administrators, the Core Curriculum Committee presented the vision, essential goals and framework for the curriculum. The overriding goal of the new curriculum is to help students develop their ability to formulate responses to enduring questions of meaning, which, in turn, are essential to the students' ability to articulate to congregants a clear vision for Jewish life. The Committee identified a series of these questions that would require the student, in formulating a response, to hone conceptualization skills. Among these questions were:

- How does Judaism provide meaning to human existence?

rabbinical program, we also had to consider new models of assessment. While student evaluation has always been conducted through the completion of academic courses, supervised clinical internships and participation in cocurricular experiences, most of this evaluation reinforces the separation between students' academic, professional, and religious formation. The new model of assessment, proposed by a national task force chaired by Professor Michael Zeldin and the Core Curriculum Planning Committee and educational consultants, focuses on and deepens students' capacity to synthesize these areas of growth.

As a result of the work of the Task Force on Assessment, it was agreed that the new protocols for assessment should both:

*Dr. Marc Bregman and students, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem.*



*Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz and students, HUC-JIR/New York.*



complement the didactic in-class experiences, and that many of the skills involved with these roles can be honed in various settings. All of their recommendations were channeled into the core curriculum planning process.

What resulted from this extensive planning was both a list of all the areas and issues upon which there was agreement in the Committee, as well as those areas that needed additional review. Over time, it was also decided to recommend the switch to a quadmester (7 weeks) system, which would:

- encourage faculty to think about how they structure and present material in their fields;
- provide added opportunities for integration between learning areas;
- suggest the use of shorter learning intensives for some subjects.

- Is there meaning to Jewish history?
- What is the nature of the ongoing relationships between God and the Jewish people?

During the Fall 2000 semester, members of the Core Curriculum Committee traveled to each stateside campus to hear the reactions and suggestions of faculty; related issues of assessment also were discussed. A curricular matrix for each year of the proposed three-year core curriculum was then developed, noting goals for student learning and levels of proficiency by discipline, skills to be acquired, and personal characteristics to be developed.

### **B. Developing New Assessment Protocols**

In order to develop our new, integrative core curriculum for the first three years of the

- guide students toward making connections among their academic studies, professional development, and spiritual growth by encouraging them to articulate meaningful statements about Judaism (Formative Assessment).
- make a judgment about the students' readiness to continue towards rabbinical ordination (Summative Assessment).

The Task Force underscored the relationship of assessment to teaching, learning, and the goals of the new curriculum:

- HUC-JIR should only assess what it values most.

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# New Rabbinical Core Curriculum

(continued from page 7)

*Dr. Richard Saranson and students, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati.*



- The primary functions of assessment are to educate students and, together with them, make decisions about the future course of their education as rabbis.
- Assessment can provide the foundation for a unified core curriculum without imposing uniformity on campuses or students.
- An assessment tool for the integrative curriculum should supplement, not supplant, other modes already in use.
- The integrative assessment should be designed to draw a limited number of new responses and to utilize ones already produced. The goal is to achieve 360-degree feedback on our students in all areas.
- Assessment ought to be rigorous yet respectful.

The Task Force suggested that portfolios be submitted to selected faculty members for review after years one and two. At the end of year three, a standing committee on each campus would review students' portfolios, making recommendations to the faculty, which would vote on students' continuance to ordination or graduation with the M.A. only.

In an effort to promote the development of new approaches to educative assessment within the Core Curriculum, the most recent faculty retreat, held in June 2002, and involving 80 faculty and administrators, focused on this topic. Dr. Everett Kline, educational consultant with Understanding by Design, was the keynote speaker and discussed alternative modes of assessment with the faculty.

Grants from both the Henry Luce Foundation and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion have made the extensive assessment planning and the necessary teacher training possible.

## C. The Essence of the Core Curriculum: Learner-centered Education

Throughout its deliberations, faculty on our Core Curriculum Committee and Assessment Task Force examined assumptions about the way our students learn and ways of assessing what we care about, as well as how HUC-JIR's culture must continue to change in order for us to institutionalize a learner-

centered approach to education. They found that, in some remarkable ways, this approach closely resembles traditional Jewish models of education in which students are asked to make sense of what they are learning, read and discourse in pairs, reflect on the application of text to everyday life, and internalize the lessons so they become part of one's daily living.

Faculty members are key participants in this College-wide initiative. Adopting the learner-centered approach to assessment and the use of portfolios will demand that faculty give feedback that helps students improve not only what they have learned, but *how*. Faculty must develop new activities to deepen students' involvement in their work and new questions to guide student discussion and analysis – activities that enable faculty to gain a broader and more holistic view of students' academic, professional and spiritual growth.

Developing assessment protocols that focus on the integrative elements of the new curriculum will also require and result in a higher level of interdepartmental and cross-campus collaboration than currently exists. Conversations about assessment and learner-centered education will need to become more regular components of faculty meetings and informal discussion.

In addition, student reflections about their learning and subsequent discussions with faculty will provide opportunities for professional and personal growth for all participants. For self-reflection to be an integral part of academic work, an atmosphere of trust and confidence must be consciously maintained. While HUC-JIR already strives to create and maintain this environment, the adoption of learner-centered assessment approaches will require an even greater commitment to this goal.

This kind of educative assessment has the potential to aid the faculty in decisions

about ordination and the students' preparation for the rabbinate. In demonstrating what students have absorbed and integrated into their understanding of Jewish life, assessment will help students become more aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for further growth. These issues, which form the basis for faculty-student dialogue, are critically important in determining whether a student proceeds to ordination.

The College-Institute's adoption of a learner-centered approach to assessment and use of portfolios will eventually strengthen the rabbinate. The skills of self-reflection required by this approach will assist students throughout their careers of service and in pursuing life-long study, so necessary for rabbinical growth. The open discourse with faculty will provide them with models for mentoring as they themselves are called upon to help nurture a new generation of committed Jews. Ultimately, HUC-JIR's shift to learner-centered assessment will assist our students in truly knowing what they value, which is essential to their effectiveness in helping others to create communities of meaning.

The new Core Rabbinic Curriculum embodies both our progress and what the College-Institute needs to be in three essential ways:

- a) A community of learners within a learning-centered environment, which will enable our students to shape a vibrant vision for Jewish life. Therefore, our challenge is not so much what we teach, but rather what our students learn and how they put it together and apply it.
- b) We are engaged in a change of culture in the College-Institute. The Core Curriculum



implementation forces us to think in new ways and work together on our campuses and cross-campus to a much greater extent.

c) We place supreme value on teaching, which must entail our concern for student learning outcomes; our responsibility to help our students integrate all facets of their HUC-JIR experience and an acknowledgment that advising and mentoring, and the ways in which we assess our students throughout their experience, are crucial.

All of this makes tremendous demands upon each member of the faculty – yet the benefits of our investing time and energy are great. First, the challenge of being more reflective and even more creative in our teaching as we review and reshape the content of what we have taught and how we communicate it, and how we assess our students, will no doubt enhance our students' growth. It will also enable them to forge a clearer vision of the relevance of the tradition for people's lives. Second, the greater collaboration with colleagues from different disciplines as well as within our own areas will be personally satisfying. It will add to our own growth as teachers and scholars as it challenges us to measure our own views in relationship to those of others. Finally, the Core Curriculum in its essence places a high priority on teaching at the College-Institute and, therefore, must be recognized as such by all of us. We must value the time and commitment invested by faculty in their teaching.

#### D. Implementation

Amidst all of our other activity, we are devoting much energy to the implementation of the new Core Curriculum for our rabbinical program and to its relevancy for our other

professional programs. We are moving ahead on each campus with the planning for our new quadmester structure and the requisite review and changes in our learning modules. The campus committees on curriculum and local faculty are working hard at reviewing the new core curriculum's aims and goals in each learning area and adapting them to the resources, expertise, and interests of our faculty.

During the past academic year, the Los Angeles faculty and administration completed the planning for the two year (the second and third years) quadmester core curriculum structure, which will be put into effect for 2<sup>nd</sup>-year rabbinical and education students this fall on a model basis. In doing so, they dealt with all the academic policy and procedural issues and structural challenges attendant to the implementation of the core curriculum. The efforts of the Los Angeles School will help our other campuses enormously as we move forward.

In Cincinnati, emphasis on collaboration and integration emphasized at the faculty retreat was continued during the year. Faculty have focused upon opportunities for integrating learning amongst different areas as well as on how to help students attain a more integrated sense of what they have learned through new modes of assessment.

In New York, the faculty is in the final stages of shaping a model quadmester structure for the second and third years. In addition, a new integrative learning module on Reform Judaism was introduced as the program for the year-opening *Kallah*. This module seeks to introduce students to the critical thinking and methodological approaches that inform the entire course of study and are the bedrock of the Core Curriculum. The faculty is also working on a module on Jewish music, which is mandated by the new curriculum guidelines.

In Jerusalem, the faculty and administration are engaged in implementing key aspects of the Core Curriculum for our first-year students. These include a basic orientation to

the purpose and nature of the curriculum, several new courses and seminars that integrate learning, including an integrative, thematic module on Jerusalem, and new assessment vehicles.

On a broader national level, the overall Core Curriculum Implementation Committee created two important planning vehicles to move the process forward. A Hebrew Planning Committee, chaired by Dr. William Cutter, discussed both the implementation of the new Hebrew matriculation standards as well as how we can concretize on each campus the Hebrew goals outlined in the new curriculum. Second, we have shaped a National Committee on Assessment to implement the overall approach to assessment of students as defined by the Core Curriculum, and how we can ensure that through the ongoing assessment of students, each of them is able to fulfill his/her potential.

Our forward-looking, creative new Core Rabbinic Curriculum (which also has begun to impact upon our other professional programs as they adapt to its structure and new learning modules) is now coming to fruition. Our first-year students in Jerusalem have already been introduced to the new curriculum and its overall approach and will benefit from it during this academic year. The new curriculum will be introduced on our state-side campuses in the fall of 2004 when our students return from Israel. In addition, our new higher matriculation standards in Hebrew and basic Jewish literacy will be introduced for all new applicants this year.

The new Core Rabbinic Curriculum's overriding message is that teaching/learning are our priority and our key role is to focus on learning outcomes, how students think and understand, what they know and what they are able to do with their knowledge. Simply put, our goal is to help our students make meaning – in each learning area and throughout their overall experience at the College-Institute, and later in their professional careers. While not shying away from the daunting challenges of implementing a new curriculum and reshaping our academic life, we are all energized by the opportunity to achieve what essentially is a sea change in the culture of HUC-JIR.