

Put the Camp Back in Campus

By Wayne Firestone
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Is that our daughter laughing and sparkling in the middle of a group of folk dancing tweens? Yes. We remember that girl. This is the child we brought into the world 11 years ago. One minute she is the picture of disaffected way-too-cool-ness, and the next, bam, she is back, a happy pre-adolescent.

What was the cause of her sudden transformation? A Jewish summer camp in the Poconos.

As a parent, I was grateful for this respite from a brooding pre-teen. As an educator I realized that summer camp is transcendent fun — the kind of fun that develops personalities and builds communities. It is a portal for informal education that often isn't viable in a conventional teaching space. Camp is guided, experiential, peer-driven education. It is certainly the most under-valued educational model, and talent pool, of our time.

Camp is an artificial, idyllic village formed around a central ideology or goal, whether it is religious Zionism or soccer stardom or creating a well-rounded camper. The adult camp leadership sets the agenda — they formulate the standards and values of this ersatz community — the parents buy into it and, faster than you can sew nametags into underwear, off go the children.

Informal education permeates the environment 24-7, even when the lesson is light to the touch. By setting rules that are taught by young staff members, and reinforced among the children themselves, the lessons are inculcated from peer to peer rather than from the top down.

The influence is subtle and pervasive. Values and skills are taught through skills and activities, rather than through theory and lecture, it is immersive rather than discursive. When the experience works properly, the children emerge from camp better than when they began: better swimmers, better people, better Jews.

The importance of peer influence in this educational experience cannot be over-emphasized. Parents and other adults carry only so much weight with their children.

Psychologists, educators and marketers all understand and exploit the importance of peer influence in inculcating a message. In today's advertising-saturated, media-savvy world, marketers call the gold standard of influence "marketing without marketing," and among their tools is the use of blogs and peer networks to disseminate their messages. In camp, students are having way too much fun in age-appropriate activities with their friends to understand that they are being educated in the values of their community.

I witnessed the same magic take place for college students and young Hillel staff at the Brandeis Bardin Institute in California this summer. College students and young Hillel staffers participated in the Brandeis Camp Institute, where they participated in traditional and non-traditional forms of Jewish expression — everything from text learning and worship to sculpture and dance. Their experience helped to reinforce and shape their own Jewish identity while it prepared them to be more creative and engaging as Jewish leaders on campus.



According to a recent study by the Avi Chai Foundation, in 2000 more than 82,000 children attended Jewish summer camps that were run by 18,000 Jewish staff members. These are young people who have been primed to play an important role as student activists, Hillel professionals and communal leaders. As a community we should find new ways to facilitate their transition from camp to campus to community.

Years ago, Richard Joel seized the camping venue to promote the Jewish renaissance. At the recent Charles Schusterman International Student Leaders Assembly at Camp Ramah Darom in Clayton, Ga., we experimented a bit with the model. In the space of just one week, we attempted to create a cadre of leaders from students with an extensive Jewish background and from those who had rarely done anything “Jewish” before.

We abandoned frontal lectures and workshops for innovative, experiential, peer-to-peer programs. For those who never attended a Shabbat service, we invited them to become “Shabbat tourists” guided by an experienced Jewish educator, tasting and participating in denominational and extra-denominational experiences. We are hopeful that our newly trained student leaders will be prepared to re-create this pluralistic, welcoming, dynamic Jewish community when they return to campus.

Why did we choose the same camp venue for the disparate trainings? Because the university setting is camp writ large — it is no accident that the terms “camp” and “campus” share the same etymological root, the Latin word for “field.”

The university is not just a vocational school or an academic institution, but a community set apart, and engaged with, the world around it. The university leadership sets the standards and values of their community, hires faculty and administrators who share those standards and values, and admits students who can live up to these criteria. Students leave campus better than when they went in. At least that’s the way it is supposed to work.

In his 2005 book “Our Underachieving Colleges,” the interim president of Harvard University, Derek Bok, points out that American universities were founded to advance the mind and character of their students. He asserts that they are currently challenged on both counts. Bok writes that “studies indicate that problem-based discussion, group study, and other forms of active learning produce greater gains in critical thinking than lectures, yet the lecture format is still the standard in most college classes, especially in large universities.” Bok urges the teaching of “citizenship” and “service-learning” courses to encourage students to participate meaningfully in the world outside their academic village.

Groups such as Hillel, Chabad, Keshet, Koach and other on-campus organizations can fill in the gaps left by the universities themselves. We can teach values by engaging the outside community. We can reinforce classroom learning with real-world experience.

By working with the university to create peer-driven, innovative, enjoyable educational experiences outside the classroom, we can reinforce the university’s own standards and values. We can market without marketing, teach without teaching — in other words, we can enhance students’ educational experience by putting the camp back into campus.

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