



LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

The Lasting
Impacts of
icnext on
Program Alumni

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Jewish Federation
OF CLEVELAND



Jewish
Education
Center
OF CLEVELAND



Rosov
CONSULTING

Information
Insight
Impact

Executive Summary

- Alumni valued the program most for how it shaped their understandings of Israel in all of its complexity, and for the ways in which the program influenced their college and career paths.
- The pre-trip and Israel-related program experiences gave alumni new knowledge about Israel, from multiple perspectives. Being exposed to Israel from so many different perspectives allowed alumni to develop skills to critically assess information, cultivate their own personal narratives around Israel, and to build concrete Israel advocacy skills.
- Program alumni gained and enhanced a number of skills from the program, including writing, advocacy, public speaking, time management, event planning, navigating social media, and social skills.
- As a result of participating in the program, alumni felt deeper and more multifaceted connections to a number of communities. Alumni developed lifelong friendships with fellow program participants; developed deeper feelings of connection to Israel and Israelis; and felt more connected to the broader multid denominational Jewish community.
- Participating in the program gave alumni the confidence to speak about Israel with peers and strangers, and they felt more mentally and emotionally prepared for the possibility of encountering anti-Israel sentiments and BDS on college campuses.
- Alumni of the program have remained connected to Israel since the program. Nearly all alumni have returned to Israel since completing the program, and more than half of alumni became actively engaged in pro-Israel and Israel advocacy organizations of varied political leanings during college. Those who did not join or lead organizations on campus still engaged in personal advocacy by engaging peers in conversations about Israel, using the knowledge and skills they gained from the program.
- Alumni believe that the first-year seminars and Israel trip are the most memorable and impactful components of the program, while the second-year experience is less so, due to some challenges with timing and diminished programmatic organization and purpose.
- Alumni attribute the high quality of the program to the high quality of the people running the program. Some expressed concerns about the future of the program, should current professionals depart.
- Some alumni have expressed interest in the creation of a larger icnext/wofi alumni network, facilitated by program staff. While many have remained in touch with members of their cohort over the years, alumni were interested in being connected to alumni from all cohorts of the program, given the interesting life-paths that many have taken since their program experience.

Background



In 2018, in partnership with the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC), the Jewish Federation of Cleveland hired Rosov Consulting to study the impact of the Israel.Cleveland.Next (icnext) program, “a two-year program that educates Cleveland Jewish high school students from all denominations on the core issues of Israeli society and the geopolitical situation in Israel today.” The program originally began as Write on For Israel (wofi) (2008–2013) and merged with the Ambassadors for Unity program in 2014 to become icnext.¹ The primary changes to the program in 2014 include the addition of a *mifgash* host-exchange with Israeli teens from Cleveland’s partnership region of Beit Shean, and opportunities for participants to learn about Israel from *shinshinim*. Despite this and some other minor changes in the focus on skills, the goal of icnext has remained the same throughout its iterations: to deepen Israel engagement and advocacy, and to cultivate young leadership among teens in the Cleveland Jewish community.

The program seeks to achieve impact through three program stages:

An eight-part series of seminars in Cleveland to orient teens to Israel’s history, contemporary society, and geopolitical situation while cultivating advocacy and communication skills.

A 10-day trip to Israel, where teens experience the realities of Israeli life and connect with Israeli adults and teens.

A series of post-trip Cleveland-based team projects in which participants showcase and share their Israel experiences and learnings with the larger Cleveland Jewish community.

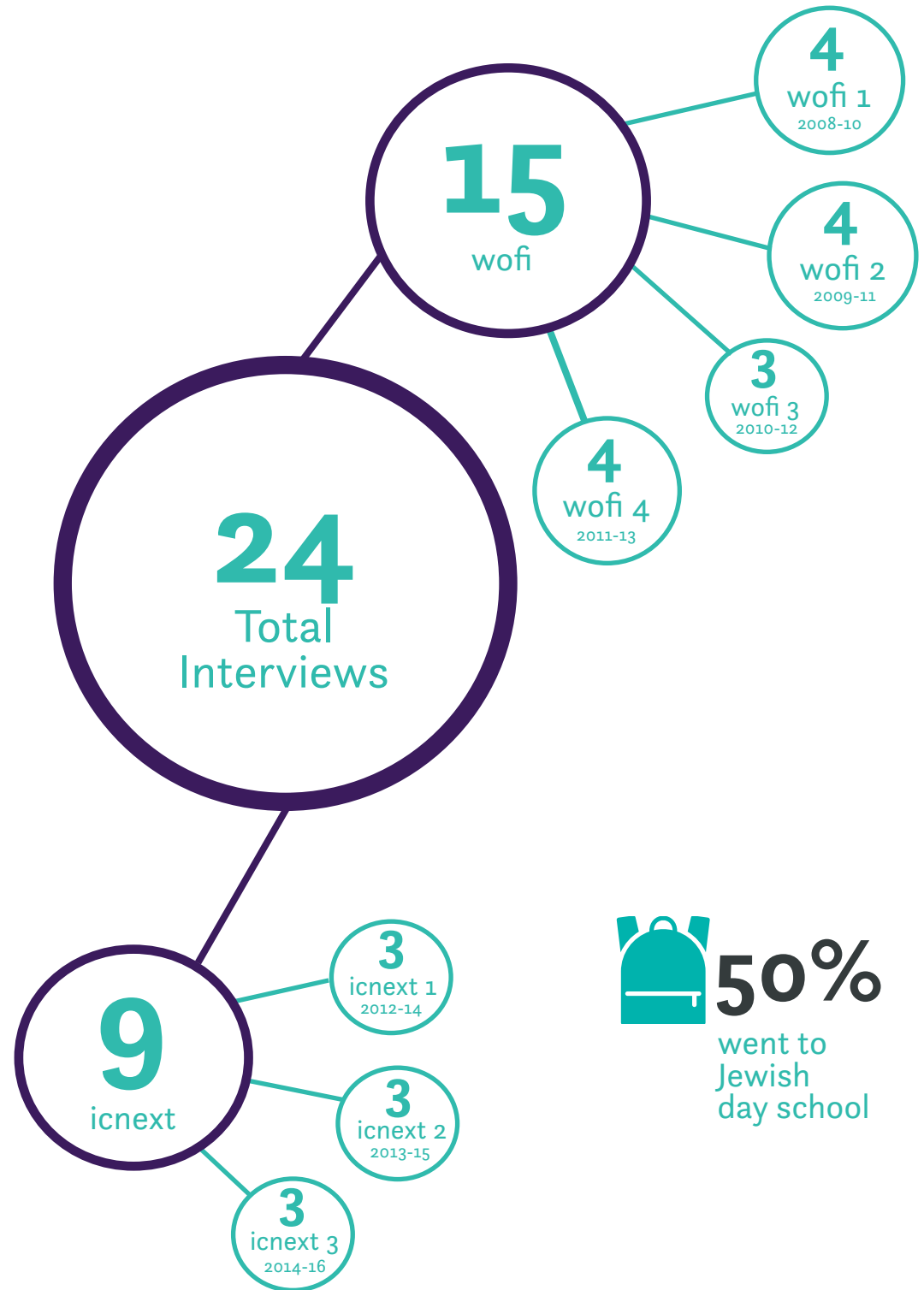
¹ Because we make some comparisons between the wofi and icnext iterations of the program, we will refer to “the program” when alumni of both iterations shared perspectives and outcomes. We refer specifically to icnext or wofi when presenting findings unique to those stages of the program.

Methods

To understand and evaluate the impact of the icnext program, Rosov Consulting conducted in-depth interviews with program alumni who were in or beyond college. In consultation with JECC and the Federation, a qualitative research approach was chosen in order to explore specific outcomes and alumni perceptions of program impact that were not fully known. **Interviews allowed us to explore and identify the nuanced ways in which the program impacts participants' lives over time, to observe unexpected emergent outcomes, and to understand the meaning of the program to former participants.**

Prior to planning and conducting the interviews, Rosov Consulting worked with key icnext stakeholders to identify intended outcomes of the program, which were presented in a Logic Model (a visual representation of the relationships between program resources, activities, and outcomes). The interview questions then probed whether alumni experienced these intended outcomes, while also leaving space for them to articulate emergent, unexpected outcomes. This report details the findings in both categories.

In all, Rosov Consulting conducted interviews with 24 alumni, speaking to three or four alumni from each of seven cohorts of the program (participants from 2008–2016); in total, we spoke to 15 wofi alumni, and 9 icnext alumni. In order to account for the possible impact of rigorous formal Jewish education, we sought a balance of interviewees who had and had not attended Jewish day schools with the understanding that day school attendance could be used as a proxy for levels of Jewish engagement; as such, 12 of our interviewees were day school alumni, and 12 interviewees had not attended day school. Additional information about the interview sampling can be found in Appendix A.



KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of Enduring Impact

wofi and icnext impacted alumni by...

- Having direct and indirect impacts on college and career paths.
- Granting nuanced understandings of Israel in all its complexity.
- Facilitating personal political development (wofi only).
- Developing skills to critically assess information (wofi only).

Impacts on College and Career Paths

Alumni were asked to identify key **experiences, activities, or events** that participating in the program may have set in motion in their lives. The majority of alumni said that the program had either a **direct or indirect impact on their college and career paths**, propelling or supporting their trajectories in a number of ways. These included: enhancing their applications to universities and internship positions; preparing them for professional life (in terms of self-comportment and the confidence to engage and speak); equipping them with comprehensive knowledge about Israel, which in turn enhanced their passion to engage with and advocate for Israel in college and beyond; and developing their connection to Israel, which for some resulted in living and working there.

My [youth movement] trip to Israel didn't inspire me; wofi did. I spent a summer at yeshiva in Jerusalem when I was in college. wofi inspired me to keep on engaging. It was a step in my process of lifelong engagement with Israel and having a growing changing relationship with Israel. —wofi alum

Understandings of Israel

The multiple perspectives to which alumni were exposed through the program helped them develop **nuanced understandings of Israel in all of its complexity**. Although not all alumni ended up in careers or fields of study related to Israel advocacy, all expressed that they continue to feel prepared and knowledgeable enough to engage in conversations about Israel with peers, colleagues, family, and others.

Additional wofi Impacts

Some perceived impacts were unique to wofi alumni. wofi alumni indicated that the program activated **their personal political development**, and their ability to see themselves as **empowered political agents**. For some, this meant further engagement with Israel. For others, the program provided a more general sense of political power and engagement, which led them to active leadership in their broader communities on issues that mattered to them. Additionally, wofi alumni indicated that the program was key in developing their ability to critically assess and consume information in the media, a highly valuable and transferrable skill.



KEY FINDINGS

Knowing and Knowing How

- The pre-trip and Israel-related experiences gave alumni **new knowledge and perspectives about Israel** — particularly knowledge about the history of Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the complexities of Israeli culture — beyond that which they had gained as Jewish teens in Cleveland.
- This exposure to multiple perspectives on Israel helped alumni develop their abilities to **critically assess information, cultivate their own personal narratives around Israel, and build concrete skills for Israel advocacy.**
- Most wofi alumni found that the program **enhanced and strengthened their writing skills** by providing training in different styles of journalistic writing.
- Additional (and unexpected) skills gained from wofi included **public speaking skills, time management, social skills** like learning how to work on a team or to better interact with strangers, **event planning, and how to navigate social media platforms and affiliated technology.** icnext alumni also reported gains in public speaking skills, though not the other additional skills reported by wofi alumni.



I remember talking to all the different groups in the conflict. I learned about it in Jewish Day School, the Israeli Jewish side. My year in icnext...[was] helpful for me understanding the nuances and complexities of the conflict. That was good – talking to Arab Israelis, people living close to West Bank, people who worked in government, [and] people who moved to Israel. —icnext alum

[The] Most memorable part was content. I had known things from day school, but the wofi seminars were extremely in-depth and tied things together in formal ways. Growing up in a Zionist day school, we took for granted that you should be pro-Israel [...] wofi took that and gave it a political context: what does it mean to be pro-Israel in a political sense? What are you signing up for? What is Israel's geopolitical position? What is it, culturally? —wofi alum

New Knowledge and Perspectives

Alumni felt that the program content and experiences were uniquely curated to generate new knowledge and perspectives about Israel, to which they had generally not been previously exposed as Jewish teens in Cleveland. They explained that much of their Israel education prior to the program — from family and friends, Hebrew school, or day school — was limited in scope and lacked the multi-dimensionality and depth of knowledge that they gained from the program. Alumni stressed that they gained a greater depth of unbiased knowledge from the program, particularly knowledge about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the history of Israel.

The broad range of perspectives on Israel — including liberal and conservative approaches to Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — to which alumni were exposed during the first year's educational seminars and Israel trip helped them to grasp the complexities of Israeli culture and the geopolitical status of Israel as a nation-state. Including diverse voices and perspectives on Israel in the program shattered any notions alumni may have had of Israel as a unified place, helping them to understand Israel as a living, evolving democratic nation. This multi-perspective approach also established a perception of the program as politically unbiased, enhancing its appeal and credibility for participants.



One of the most important things [I learned] was how and when to actually engage in a discussion with a clear goal in mind. Lots of people like to argue without having a goal in mind, especially when talking about Israel and Palestine. icnext is good about teaching how to make a case, and how to be productive about it. [It taught us] How to get our point of view across without turning a discussion into a shouting match. —icnext alum

Skills and Personal Development

The exposure to multiple perspectives on Israel engendered among alumni an **active, rather than passive, orientation towards consuming information**. Alumni spoke of how the program pushed them to not take information at face value, but instead, to critically evaluate an issue by searching broadly for information, interrogating all sides, and investigating sources to uncover potential media bias.

For many participants, the program also provided a space to **cultivate their own personal narratives and political takes on Israel**, whether conservative, centrist, or liberal. Some also described the program as a platform for rousing their political consciousness and inspiring them to learn more about the political situation in Israel, along with other global political issues.

Finally, the program provided alumni with **concrete advocacy skills**, such as active listening, presenting a case in order to shift perspectives gradually through dialogue, engaging in discussions with a clear goal in mind, and the “ARM” method: “Advocate, Reframe, Message.”

Once they began having conversations on their campuses, some wofi alumni found that methods like ARM were not as effective as **soft advocacy methods** that emphasized building relationships and humanizing Israel and Israelis by showcasing the food, music, diversity, and rich heritage of Israel. From the reflections of icnext alumni, the program appears to have updated its curricula to teach softer and more flexible forms of advocacy, which alumni have found to be more useful on their campuses.

Alumni had mixed feedback about the impact of the program on their writing skills. While most **wofi alumni spoke positively** about the writing elements of the program — explaining that it helped them to learn or practice applying different styles of journalistic writing, including first-person narratives, analyses of media bias, and persuasive writing — **alumni from the wofi 4 cohort and beyond (2011–2016)** rarely mentioned writing and, if they did, described the writing elements of the program as weaker and less productive than the instruction they received at school.

[It] Awakened my curiosity to explore the complexity inherent in so many issues regionally, globally, and nationally. [It was a] Political awakening in terms of [me] wanting to become more involved. The job I took in college at [redacted] was slightly informed by the curiosity I had in the program. —wofi alum

[We learned] To be more aware that what you're hearing with any conflict is only one side. There are multiple sides. You're not there to convince the other person, you're there to educate. You're there to be a resource to middle group of people who don't know much about it. I definitely took that to college with me. —icnext alum

KEY FINDINGS

Attitudes and Connections

- Alumni developed **deeper and more multifaceted connections to Israel and Israelis** as a result of their participation in the program.
- Nearly all alumni **wished to return to Israel** independently or on other organized trips, and alumni universally expressed a desire to stay in tune with Israeli life and politics.
- Alumni developed **strong connections to their fellow icnext participants**, making new friendships and deepening preexisting ones.
- The multi-denominational make-up of wofi led those alumni to **feel more connected to the broader multid denominational Jewish community and more comfortable in diverse Jewish settings**.
- Many alumni gained **confidence to ask difficult questions and to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations** with peers and strangers on divisive issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- An unexpected outcome was that both wofi and icnext alumni reported **feeling more mentally and emotionally prepared for the possibility of encountering BDS and anti-Israel sentiment on their campuses, particularly program alumni who did not attend day schools**.



Connection to Israel and Israelis

The Israel trip helped alumni to see and understand Israel as a familiar place. Alumni became more comfortable with the idea of spending a gap year in Israel, and they deepened their sense of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people and a significant part of their Jewish identity.

These feelings of familiarity and comfort grew out of seeing and speaking to people in Israel who were going about their daily lives and business, and learning from Israeli politicians that the business of running a government is not so different in Israel. Exposure to diverse perspectives from and about Israel also highlighted the internal conflicts and political divisions within the country, all of which are typical of a democracy.

This connection led to a **desire to stay in tune with Israeli life and politics** by keeping tabs on Israel in the news. Whether or not they went on to careers or to study in fields related to Israel and/or Jewish life, all but one alum said that reading news about Israel was a typical part of

their life and a way to stay in touch with their Jewish identities.

Several wofi alumni described how powerful and moving it was to see just how similar they were to the Arab Israeli teens they met, while also acknowledging the specific ways in which their lives differed and the hardships their counterparts had experienced. At least one wofi participant came away from these encounters with an understanding that her Zionism and concern for Israeli people and history outside of the Jewish experience were not mutually exclusive. icnext alumni did not mention encounters with Arab Israelis.

For a significant minority of icnext alumni, the *mifgash* host-exchange with teens from Beit Shean **was the most meaningful part of the program**, leading to ongoing connections with Israeli teens they met. icnext alumni describe staying in touch with these teens on subsequent trips to Israel.

I enjoyed going to the various businesses that we saw in Israel. Because we got to see people just existing. [...] It impressed upon me [...] that when we're talking about the politics of Israel, we're talking about real people with careers and lives that are trying to do what everyone else is doing, which is to make meaningful existence out of this life, [...] and I think if people were to see that, they would empathize. —wofi alum

[The program's Israel trip] was my first experience meeting Arab and Palestinian youth, and that was really powerful. [...] We hung out with them, had dinner, mostly we were just chatting. It felt powerful at multiple levels – these are just people. It was also really important to see the ways that their lives were different from most Israelis and see the hard things they went through. On my other Israel trips, we skirted the issue. wofi dove straight in, to embracing the complexity. —wofi alum

Part of it was just that these were Israeli people roughly my age [...] trying to live life just like everyone else, but in a hot-button spot of the world. [...] Having been to Israel a couple of times [...] It felt like a second home [...]. They were welcoming – they felt like a friend or a relative. —icnext alum



I was part of AEPi [...] I went to the national training and met other Jewish kids from Jewish universities all over the country. Being in wofi and being around different kinds of Jews gave me that comfort. Some people are very black and white, they're only comfortable with one type of people. For me, being in wofi, I was religious and friends with people who weren't. It gave me that comfort so I was used to being in that variety of Jewish people. —wofi alum

Connection to Cohort Peers

A significant number of program alumni reported that they made new friends or deepened preexisting friendships with other teens in the program. Some maintained casual connections to cohort members over the years — touching base via social media, or in person when returning to Cleveland to visit family — while others developed deep and significant friendships. For example, one alum attended college with good friends that he made through the program and with whom he later participated in Hillel. Another describes meeting his best friend through the program and later finding career connections through this friend.

Connection to Cleveland Jewish Community

Although alumni did not speak explicitly about feeling connected to the Cleveland Jewish community, per se, a number of wofi alumni indicated that one of the values of the program came from participants' denominational diversity. For some, this was their first experience with “different kinds of Jews.” Exposure to Jewish diversity fostered a certain Jewish cosmopolitanism by preparing alumni for multid denominational Jewish contexts in college and beyond. No icnext alumni reported this impact. This may reflect changes to the composition of program participants, as icnext had fewer participants from Fuchs Mizrachi School — a Modern Orthodox day school — than wofi.



[There are] A lot of anti-Israel activities at [my university]. It gave me the knowledge of what you might see on campus, so when I heard them, I wasn't so shocked by it. —wofi alum

[The trip] was really the first time I would speak to people around my age about Israel... On the trip we saw a lot of different things. We were on those buses for a long time, so you end up talking about a lot of the things you learn. That prepared me to talk to people back home about Israel. I love to talk about Israel with friends back home now, even non-Jewish friends. —icnext alum

I felt right at home in the pro-Israel clubs in campus that I got involved in. Because of my involvement [in the program], I was able to speak like others about going to Israel, speak about the conflict, society, history, culture, and food. —wofi alum

Feeling Empowered to Advocate

Many alumni felt that the program gave them **the confidence to ask difficult questions and to engage in and facilitate difficult conversations** with peers and strangers on divisive issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Additionally, several wofi alumni said that their second-year trips to the AIPAC conference in DC, where they were able to speak directly to members of Congress on behalf of Israel, imbued them with a sense of political empowerment (icnext participants also attend AIPAC conferences, but do so through a different program, @Akiva). For some, this empowerment and confidence led naturally to Israel advocacy on college campuses. Others who were not organizationally

active on campus still felt prepared by their wofi experiences to engage in conversations about Israel with friends and family back home.

Still others described how the program **mentally and emotionally prepared them for the possibility of encountering pro-BDS and anti-Israel sentiments on their campuses**, which allowed them to feel confident navigating those contexts and conversations. **Emotional preparation for encountering antagonistic perspectives on Israel seemed especially important for program alumni who did not attend day schools.**

KEY FINDINGS

Behaviors and Choices

- **Behavioral impacts of wofi and icnext are limited while the participants are still in high school.** Most participants don't have time for additional Israel engagement activities, although many recommend the program to younger friends and family members.
- Many alumni believed that participation in the program **positively impacted their college applications.**
- In college, many alumni **deepened their learning about Jewish and Israel-related topics** through taking Hebrew and Judaic Studies courses and following Israel in the news.
- More than half of alumni were actively engaged in **pro-Israel and Israel advocacy organizations of varied political leanings on their college campuses.**
- Alumni who did not join or lead advocacy organizations still **engaged in personal advocacy by having conversations about Israel using knowledge and skills that they gained from the program.**
- Alumni took on a **variety of leadership roles during and after college (both Israel-related and not).**
- Most alumni have **returned to Israel since their program experience.**
- **Most alumni reported being engaged in Jewish life in college. Post-college, alumni who attended day school are more likely to be Jewishly engaged than those who did not.**

Impacts on High School Years

Upon returning to Cleveland, most alumni actively recommended wofi or icnext to eligible younger siblings or friends who they believed would benefit from the program and have a similarly positive experience. Some alumni recalled that program staff may have explicitly asked them to recommend the program, while others explained that their recommendations were independent of any such requests. All, however, made their recommendations because they believed that the program was important, impactful, and a great opportunity for Jewish teens in Cleveland to learn about and experience Israel in meaningful ways.

For most alumni, wofi or icnext was one of the last organized Israel-focused activities in which they participated while in high school, as by senior year they were too focused on college admissions to take on any new activities. As such, very few alumni reported participating in other Israel-focused programs in the time between their program participation and beginning college.

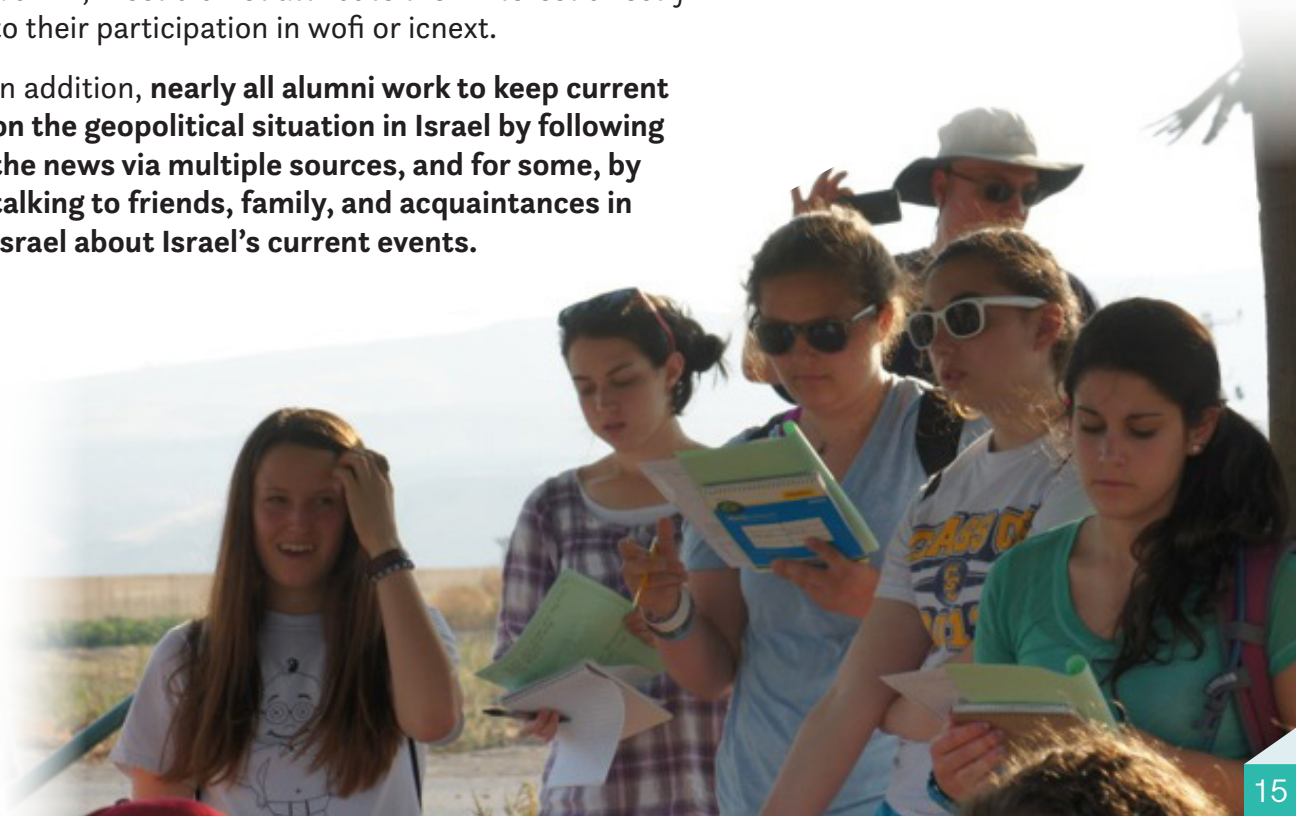
Although both wofi and icnext alumni had encounters with Israeli teens as a part of their program experience, the incorporation of an exchange program with Israeli teens from Beit Shean in the icnext iterations of the program appears to have facilitated deeper connections between alumni and their Israeli counterparts. To wit, a **number of icnext alumni have remained in contact with the Israeli teens they met through icnext over the years**, ranging from occasional communications around the holidays to building and maintaining deeper friendships for years. wofi alumni did not report maintaining contact with the Israeli teens they met through the program trip to Israel.

Intellectual Engagement with Jewish and Israel-Related Topics

The impacts of the program become more relevant and visible for alumni during college. Many believed that **participation in the program positively impacted the competitiveness of their college applications**, and for some, the skills they developed to critically assess information enhanced their savviness about identifying and choosing colleges that were appropriate for them.

Once in college, most alumni took at least one course that allowed them to **continue learning about Israeli history and politics, Palestinian literature, Hebrew, Arabic, and Jewish history and culture**, if such courses were available at their colleges and universities. Although the interest in these courses was widespread among program alumni, most did not attribute their interest directly to their participation in wofi or icnext.

In addition, **nearly all alumni work to keep current on the geopolitical situation in Israel by following the news via multiple sources, and for some, by talking to friends, family, and acquaintances in Israel about Israel's current events.**



Israel Advocacy and Political Engagement

A majority of alumni led or participated in Israel advocacy organizations or organizations of varied political leanings that explore Israel on their college campuses, such as The David Project, Birthright Israel, Onward Israel, Hasbara Fellowships, J Street, StandWithUs, and other Israel advocacy groups that were unique to their campuses. While some alumni attributed this engagement directly to wofi/icnext, others felt that they would have been likely to engage in those activities regardless of program participation or they could not distinguish the specific impacts of various Israel-related experiences in terms of inspiring their advocacy work.

Other alumni who were less drawn to organizations found ways to engage in Israel advocacy that were more suited to their interests and personalities. Nearly all alumni used the skills and knowledge that the program provided to confidently engage in conversations about Israel. Even those who didn't have the opportunity or need to advocate against BDS on their campuses felt prepared to do so if the occasion arose because of their participation in the program.

Some alumni were inspired by their experience to engage in other forms of political action, either alongside or instead of Israel advocacy, using skills such as the ability to see and engage other perspectives, navigating difficult conversations on uncomfortable topics, interning and joining political party groups, and general civic engagement both during and after college. As one alum stated, the program provided a sort of political awakening, and, indeed, many alumni are engaged and active citizens of the world.

I've been to the AIPAC Policy Conference three times since icnext... icnext enhanced my interest in events like that, as well as working to ensure there's a pro-Israel sentiment on campus. —icnext alum

Because I went to wofi, I knew I wanted to be involved in Israel in college, in some respect, [though I] didn't know what that would look like. At Hillel they would show you different things to be involved in, [and] it was helpful to have wofi on my resume to get involved in those things. It sparked my interest in that. —wofi alum

It gave me a greater awareness of the situation with Israel and people not having good perspectives on it, or how to handle that. I won't say I'm constantly fighting people who are uneducated about Israel, but I can think of a couple times in college where I'd make a Facebook post, and I would engage in a way that I think was changing perspectives. I wouldn't have been as comfortable responding if I hadn't been through the program. It's not anything big and life altering, but it has given me the standing and comfort to respond in those situations. —wofi alum



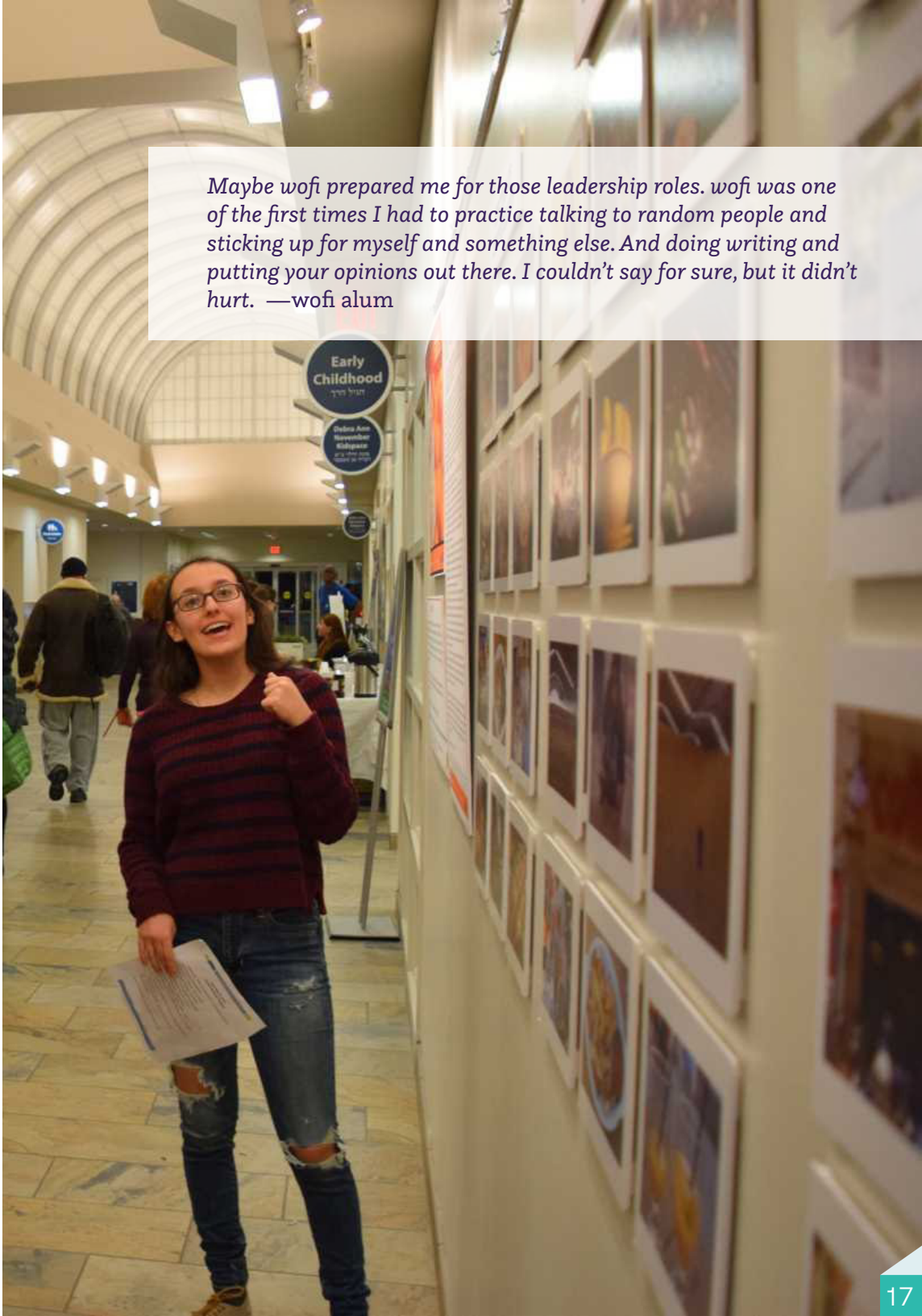
Leadership and Career Choices

Many alumni have taken on leadership or influencer roles in campus organizations: as Israel engagement coordinators, presidents of their fraternities/sororities, Hillel board members, and leading Jewish services on campus. Some have continued to engage in pro-Israel leadership and advocacy in their post-college careers or have gone on to found and lead other mission-driven organizations.

Alumni also exhibited leadership skills outside of traditional organizational roles by coordinating conversations about Israel on campus; soliciting and organizing speaker and volunteer events; building relationships between different campus organizations; and coordinating actions against BDS on their campuses.

Alumni also exhibited leadership simply by **speaking out about issues they cared about, despite any fears of encountering resistance or controversy**. Alumni described memorable moments, such as standing and asking questions of speakers at public events or speaking out against BDS to their college student government.

Finally, though most alumni work in secular settings, a significant minority of alumni have pursued careers in Israel advocacy or the Jewish communal sector. Day school enrollment and prior levels of engagement as teens seems to have had little impact on leadership and career outcomes for alumni, that is, whether they have been leaders in their universities and beyond, and whether they pursued careers as Jewish professionals or Israel advocates.

A young woman with glasses and a maroon sweater is walking through a gallery of framed photographs. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The gallery has a high, arched ceiling and the walls are covered with many small, framed photographs. In the background, other people are visible, and there are signs on the wall, including one that says "Early Childhood".

Maybe wofi prepared me for those leadership roles. wofi was one of the first times I had to practice talking to random people and sticking up for myself and something else. And doing writing and putting your opinions out there. I couldn't say for sure, but it didn't hurt. —wofi alum



The icnext trip got me familiar with Israel so I was comfortable going on the gap year [...] Just hearing all those different narratives and really seeing how Israel is so diverse and big — I knew that Israel was a diverse country for how small it is, but going out and seeing how real it is, allowed me to do it and discuss and experience it with my friends. [It] Made me realize it would be incredible to come back for an extended period with my friends. —icnext alum

Israel Connections and Ongoing Jewish Engagement

The majority of alumni have either returned to Israel since the program or expressed the desire to do so. Many alumni spent gap years in Israel — studying at yeshiva or mechina, or through other programs. For some alumni, their gap year was clearly inspired by their experience in the program. A larger proportion of wofi alumni participated in gap years than icnext alumni; this is likely due to the relatively larger number of modern Orthodox teens who participated in wofi, compared to icnext.

Others traveled to Israel for internships, study abroad, or other Israel experience programs during college. Alumni have attended Birthright trips, participated in the Hasbara fellowship program, Onward Israel, StandWithUs, The David Project, and Young Judea, among others. While some merely attended these trips, others led them, drawing heavily on the knowledge they acquired from the program to plan experiences for other students. Still others have returned to Israel on personal trips, where they shared what they had learned through the program with friends and family.

Most alumni were engaged Jewishly during college, participating in Hillel or Chabad, attending services, observing Shabbat, and/or participating in Jewish Greek life. Day school enrollment and levels of engagement appear to have had little impact on how alumni chose their colleges and college majors. For those who said that their college or major choice was influenced by their Jewish identities and values, many cited the search for a campus community that had Jewish resources and/or a critical mass of Jewish students where they would be more comfortable observing Jewish practices.

Post-college and early career alumni (wofi alumni, cohorts 1–4) are much less engaged Jewishly, meaning that they were less observant and participated in Jewish communal organizations and activities less frequently than they did in college. This is unsurprising, given that this stage of life is typically marked by a focus on career development, and the density and availability of Jewish communal experiences is lower outside of campus contexts. However, former day school attendees seemed to be more likely to remain Jewishly engaged after college than those who did not attend day school.

KEY FINDINGS

General Program Feedback

- While the **first-year seminars and the Israel trip are perceived as both memorable and impactful**, the second-year experience is less so due to challenges with timing and diminished organization and purpose. However, some wofi alumni did find the AIPAC trip in DC to be highly impactful.
- Many alumni feel that **the high quality of the program was in part due to the high quality of the people running it**. Staff exhibited passion and knowledge, cared about participants and their ideas, and provided meaningful mentorship. This did raise some concerns about the future of the program, should these particular professionals depart.
- Some icnext alumni had divergent expectations of the experience, **as some sought an intellectually rigorous program of learning and engaging with Israel, while others expected a more fun and touristy experience**. This likely reflects the hybrid nature of the program, as it does seek to combine meaningful learning with more social and cultural engagement with Israeli life.
- Many alumni of the program said that they stayed in touch with members of their program cohort over the years. A few **expressed interest in the creation of a larger icnext/wofi alumni network, facilitated by the program staff**. These alumni cited the interesting life-paths of program alumni as a motivation and opportunity to connect.

Program Structure

Alumni universally indicated that **the trip to Israel and, secondarily, the first-year seminars on the history and politics of Israel, were the most memorable components of the program for them.** From their perspective, these elements of the program appeared to be better structured and implemented, and they had a higher impact on their learning than the second year.

When asked about the activities they engaged in during the **second year of the program, most alumni struggled to remember what activities they had done**, who they had done them with, and the purpose of those activities. Some recognized the intended value of the second year, but still found this portion of the program to be less impactful.

Alumni indicated that in part, this was due to the organization of the program of the second year — less structured, less intense, and lacking a clearly communicated purpose² — but also because most participants were, at this point, focused on college applications and the transition they would soon be making from high school to college life.

One notable exception is that a number of **wofi alumni** tended to remember their participation in an **AIPAC conference in Washington, D.C. during their second year** of the program. For some alumni, the idea that an 18-year-old could speak directly to their Congressperson and potentially impact political process was a powerful lesson in political empowerment. Others remembered this encounter but did not comment on the impact or potential lessons of the experience.

² The second year of the icnext program has undergone significant restructuring in the last couple of years, so this finding should be taken with a grain of salt. To understand the impact of second year activities in icnext, attention may best be directed towards more recent internal evaluative materials.

In terms of the value add of the second year — there's something to be said for trying to give back to the community immediately after the trip, to stay involved and not just have it end with the trip. That being said, most of what I remember was first year [and trip related]. —icnext alum



wofi/icnext Professionals

Without prompting, alumni spontaneously shared that the high quality of the program was due in part to the high quality of the people running it. Amnon Ophir, Program Director, was fondly remembered by all, and Rabbi Unterberg — who made aliyah before the program transitioned to icnext — was repeatedly cited as a positive influence on the program. Alumni expressed that it was not only the passion and knowledge that these professionals brought to the program that impressed them, but that they felt that staff genuinely cared about them and their ideas, and therefore provided significant and positive mentorship.

Amnon really mentored me – I really felt he valued my voice and my contributions and who I was as a person specifically. As a kind of weird teenager, it meant a lot to have someone feel like I had something important to say. —wofi alum

Rabbi Unterberg [...] gave us such a nuanced informed perspective on Israel's history. I had gone to Jewish day school [but] I never got a systematic view of Jewish history. I really appreciated the sessions with him. —wofi alum

Given the dependence of the program's quality on the charismatic leadership and knowledge of program staff, several alumni also expressed concerns that the program might not be as viable if particular professionals were to leave their positions.

Amnon does an amazing job. If Amnon leaves or stops, the entire program dies. It's the only youth Jewish academic engagement program in the area. [...] He deserves incredible credit for what he does. I've never heard of or seen a program like it. —icnext alum



The speakers and staff, administrators, and all of them: they were top notch. Amnon is very enthusiastic and passionate. The reason it's [the program is] still happening is because of him. —wofi alum

Cohort Composition

In more recent years of the program, some icnext alumni expressed that there seemed to be a mismatch between what they and other participants expected and experienced of the program, which affected collective and individual experiences of the program. Specifically, icnext participants who were prepared for serious intellectual engagement with Israel and a deep inquiry into Israeli politics found it frustrating to be in a cohort with participants who were less knowledgeable about Israel and less serious about the intellectual goals of the program.

Conversely, some icnext alumni entered with the expectation that the learning elements of the trip would be offset by more fun, touristy activities.

We didn't even go swimming one time, and we were in Israel in July. [...] There was no balance of fun activities. And then it was like seminar after seminar, and we didn't really explore much of anything like that. Talking with my friends – we all thought the trip sucked.
—icnext alum

Given that we only heard this feedback from a small number of icnext alumni during the first two years of the program's transition to icnext, it seems likely that the mismatch in expectations and experience is the result of wofi's initial merge with the Diller Ambassadors for Unity program and eventual evolution to icnext as a hybrid program that combines intellectual experiences and learning about Israel with more social and cultural experiences of Israel. Based on this feedback, **the advertising and public communications used to recruit participants on the program may need to be clarified to avoid constructing cohorts with unclear expectations of the program.** Additionally, the **recruitment process might be made more selective** to avoid recruiting participants who expect a more light-hearted tourist experience of Israel.

I don't want to say it's a negative part of the experience, but a drawback. I don't know how they've changed the program since, but when I did the program there were people that had no prior knowledge of Israel other than knowing it's a place in the Middle East, wars happen there, and Jews consider it their homeland [...] If I could offer some advice, it would be to [...] make a statement that this program is to educate and inform; it's not a tourist trip [...] Their heart was in the right place, but their mind wasn't in the right place for what was going to happen. The intention was there, but there were mismatched expectations. —icnext alum



Conclusion

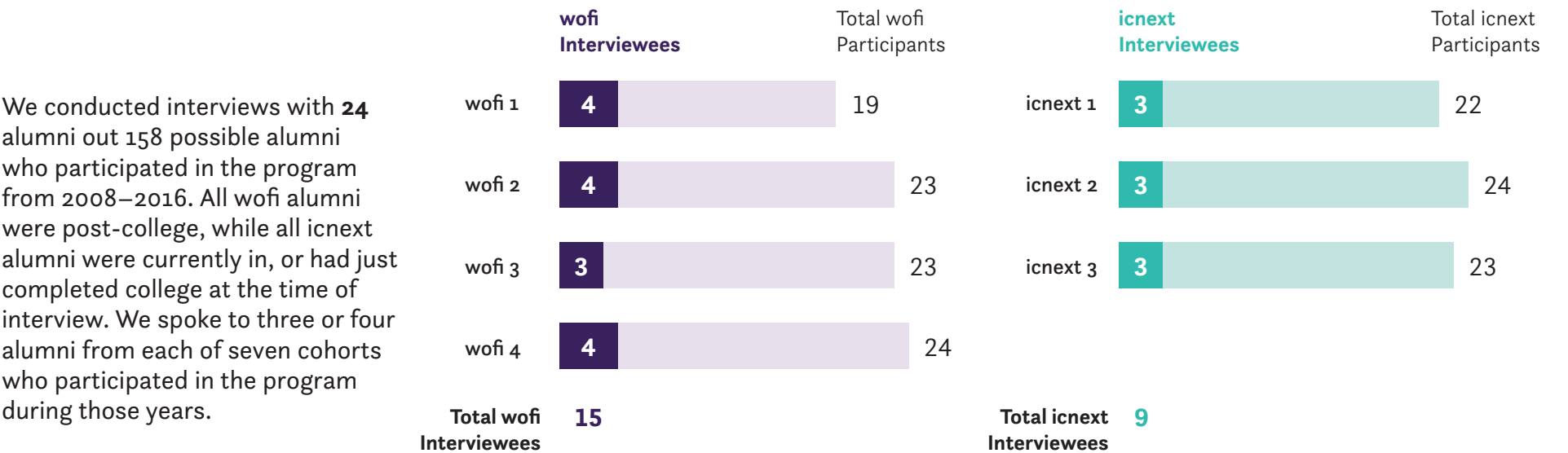
Overall, most wofi and icnext alumni look back fondly on their time in the program and expressed gratitude and appreciation for the foundational experiences that it provided them. Through exploring the richness of Israeli history and politics in all its complexity, participants developed deeper connections to Israel and Israelis, and, for many, the desire to make Israel engagement an ongoing part of their lives. There were, however, some important differences in the impacts the program had on alumni from the wofi and icnext cohorts. icnext alumni were more likely to remain in direct contact with Israelis they met through the program. wofi alumni reported that their experience developed their skills in areas such as writing, advocacy, public speaking, and leadership. This difference may be due to the profile of the participants each program attracted, the changes made to the curriculum and content when wofi evolved into icnext, or the fact that wofi alumni, who were older when interviewed, have had more time to perceive the impacts and ripple effects of the program on their lives than the icnext alumni (or, most likely, a combination of all three factors).

Regardless, these findings provide an important opportunity for program staff and stakeholders to reflect on their goals for icnext, and whether and how alumni experiences reflect these goals. While many of the intended outcomes initially identified during the Logic Model process were indeed validated by participants' reflections, some were revealed to be more prevalent for wofi alumni than those from more recent icnext cohorts. In order to bring these intended outcomes and realized results into alignment, icnext stakeholders should consider whether to adjust elements of the program (such as recruitment, curriculum, or specific program experiences) and/or the stated outcomes of the Logic Model. Whichever course of action is chosen, we hope that this research has offered icnext stakeholders a pathway to increased clarity of purpose and expectations, which can in turn help icnext continue to engage, inspire, and impact teens in Cleveland for years to come.



Appendix A: Interview Sample Characteristics

The interview sample for this study was constructed purposively to achieve balanced representation of a number of alumni characteristics, including the program cohort in which they participated; whether they participated in wofi or icnext; whether or not they attended Jewish day school; and their levels of Jewish engagement prior to entering the program. Although qualitative samples are not meant to be “representative” in the same way that quantitative samples may be, we chose interviewees with particular characteristics in order to examine possible differences of experience and perspective among alumni, thus fleshing out all possible program outcomes for alumni. The Rosov Consulting team worked closely with the icnext team to develop a list of potential interviewee candidates and to solicit interviews. Below are descriptive characteristics of our final interviewee sample.



wofi alumni are slightly overrepresented compared to icnext alumni. We experienced some challenges in soliciting interviews with icnext alumni, which are likely to do with the stage of life for the different sets of alumni. All of the wofi alumni to whom we spoke were post-college and in early stages of their careers, whereas icnext alumni were still in, or just completing, college — a stage of life that is marked by less stable schedules and availability.

In order to account for the possible impact of rigorous formal Jewish education on alumni outcomes, we sought a balance of interviewees who had attended Jewish day schools, versus those who did not. We also offer a breakdown of which Jewish day schools alumni attended, since this has bearing on the length of time for which alumni were enrolled. Fuchs Mizrahi School is a Preschool–12 Jewish day school, whereas Gross Schechter Day School and Agnon Day School are Preschool-8 only. We did not interview any alumni who only attended day school for a short period, listed as “Other” in the table below.

	Fuchs Mizrahi (Preschool-12)		Gross Schechter/Agnon (Preschool-8)		Other	Non-Day School Interviewees		TOTAL Participants
	Interviewees	Total	Interviewees	Total	Total	Interviewees	Total	
wofi 1	1	3	1	8	1	2	7	19
wofi 2	0	4	2	7	2	2	10	23
wofi 3	0	4	1	9	0	2	10	23
wofi 4	1	5	1	9	0	2	10	24
icnext 1	0	3	2	10	1	1	8	22
icnext 2	0	1	1	12	3	2	8	24
icnext 3	0	1	2	12	0	1	10	23

We also tracked alumni levels of Jewish engagement prior to participating in the program, based on information provided by the icnext team, speaking to 16 alumni who were highly engaged and 8 who were moderately engaged. We did not find any discernible differences in outcomes for alumni based on their levels of pre-program engagement.

Finally, men were slightly overrepresented in the alumni sample — we spoke to 14 men and 10 women — but there were no discernible differences in outcomes for men and women.



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