

# The Kaplan Program Alumni Activities



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# The Kaplan Leadership Program and its Global Alumni Program

The Kaplan Leadership Program is the first international JDC program undertaken with the goal of developing young leadership in Jewish communities in Europe, the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Latin America (LATAM). The program is designed for young professionals in mid-level positions in Jewish communities who aspire to strengthen their influence and leadership ability, particularly within their own organizations and communities. The program focuses on providing knowledge, skills and tools in four areas: community development, leadership, Jewish content and context, and management.

The Kaplan Leadership Program has evolved during the course of two cohorts, each built on three regional seminars and one global seminar, with interim activities and assignments between seminars.

Post-program activity and alumni follow-up were not part of the original Kaplan Leadership Program design. After the end of the Kaplan Leadership Program's 1st Cohort, the respective regional groups pursued separate policies concerning post-program activity. After the end of the 2nd Cohort, which happened at the same time as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, JDC established the Global Alumni Program in parallel with the regional groups' post-program activities.



# Goals & Methods



## Evaluation Goal

To assess the expectations, perceptions and satisfaction of alumni regarding the Kaplan Leadership Program's post-program alumni activities.



## Methods

- 12 interviews: 9 interviews with alumni (3 from each region) and 3 interviews with staff (2 interviewees from each region)
- Observations of 3 on-line activities
- Document analysis (activity catalogue, staff planning documents, alumni surveys, etc.)



# The Global Alumni Program

- The Global Alumni Program was designed by the Kaplan team following recommendations contained in an [evaluation report concerning cohorts 1 and 2](#) and was also based on a needs survey and interviews of alumni by program staff.
- The general goal of the program was to deepen alumni engagement with the Kaplan Leadership Program, and to enable continued development of alumni relationships.
- The Global Alumni Program was developed dynamically and built gradually over the course of a year, overcoming constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of a previous model. Due to these challenges, the program was not based on a comprehensive vision, detailed goals and objectives, or a strategic plan. Rather, specific goals were set for each of the program components and activities.



# The Global Alumni Program – cont.

- The Global Alumni Program was launched with the publication of a catalogue for alumni that included information about the program's components: webinars, coaching and multi-regional task forces (MRTF).
- Given the timing of the establishment of the program in June 2020, program staff and alumni needed to overcome two complications in world affairs: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. At the same time, the regional programs continued to provide diverse alumni activities of varying frequency.



# The Global Alumni Program – cont.

## Global activities

- Advisory Committee
- Webinars
- Coaching
- Multi-regional task forces (MRTF)

## Regional activities

- **FSU** regional alumni activities
- **LATAM** regional network - 'Red de Profesionales Judíos AMLAT'; Project '*Jevruta*'
- **Europe** Yesod alumni network & activities



# Global Activities





# The Advisory Committee

- The Advisory Committee included four volunteer alumni fellows (One 1st Cohort alumnus from FSU, and three 2nd Cohort alumni from FSU, LATAM and Europe).
- The volunteer alumni participated in ad hoc meetings with the Kaplan team to examine staff ideas and offer suggestions for activities, content and guest lecturers.
- The Advisory Committee's insights were integrated into the Global Alumni Program. The Advisory Committee recommended the development of the MRTF project (slides 14-16), and its suggestion of a guest-lecturer for one of the webinars was adopted.
- Volunteer alumni expressed unease that they were not sure they understood the goals of the Global Alumni Program nor their roles.



# Global Webinars

The four webinars that were presented aimed to support alumni during the COVID-19 crisis and reinforce Kaplan Leadership Program knowledge, skills and tools:

**1**

Lior Shoham –  
Public Speaking in  
the Era of COVID-19.  
September 2020.  
Attendance: 38

**2**

Kiva Rabinsky –  
Creating a Personal  
Vision-board.  
November 2020.  
Attendance: 23

**3**

Dr. Erica Brown -  
Resilient Leadership  
at a Time of  
Uncertainty.  
March 2021.  
Attendance: 20

**4**

Neil Lazarus -  
Understanding Israel  
and the Middle East.  
July 2021.  
Attendance: 20



## Global Webinars – cont.

- Alumni valued the opportunity to see other alumni and engage in the exchange of ideas:

*“The most important thing is to create relationships and ... exchanging ideas with fellows, more than a certain tool or contents. So, there is value in every encounter, even if not everything is a new ‘wow’.”*

- Alumni appreciated the content of the first two webinars more than that of the last two.
- Webinars included small group discussions that were important for sharing knowledge and experiences:

*“I think that the meetings of the network - in which there are participants from both cohorts, when there are small discussions after the built-in conversation in the plenum, it is really contributing and meaningful, very helpful. The ability to test your ideas with people with a completely different experience is really rewarding.”*



## Global Webinars – cont.

- The Kaplan team divided pre-registered alumni into small groups and included in each group a combination of participants to enable communication in English. In some cases, opportunities for group discussion were weakened because some registrants failed to attend.
- Many alumni reported “Zoom fatigue” after months of remote interaction. With the decline in the pandemic and return to routine, these formats can begin to be offered again in a limited extent.



# Coaching

Alumni were offered coaching sessions intended to equip them with new skills and tools necessary for their continued personal and professional growth and their improved performance as Jewish professionals.

- 17 alumni participated in coaching sessions (7 from LATAM, 5 from FSU, and 5 from Europe).
- For FSU alumni, topics and coaches were pre-selected by the Kaplan team based on FSU alumni responses to a survey. Europe and LATAM alumni chose the topics they wished to work on, from a wider range of coaches.



## Coaching – Cont.

- Yesod (Europe) provides coaching to all its alumni. Therefore, European alumni did not realize the extent of Kaplan Alumni Program involvement in the coaching they received.
- Opportunities for customizing the focus of coaching, as provided in Europe and LATAM, increases the likelihood of coaching success.
- Overall, alumni expressed satisfaction with the coaching sessions, which included concrete assistance and advice concerning actual tasks and professional challenges they face.

*"I chose a professional development coach, it helped me explore my professional future. The coach helped me in my recent personal search."*



# Multi-Regional Task Forces

- The Multi-Regional Task Forces Project (MRTF) was a central activity of the alumni program.
- The purpose of MRTF was to offer creative solutions to problems faced by Jewish professionals as well as to enhance global collaboration and facilitate professional growth through the continuing application of knowledge, skills and tools taught by the Kaplan Leadership Program.
- The Kaplan team formulated a list of challenges based on responses to an alumni survey. Alumni were assigned to working-groups according to their interests, with the goal of achieving global representation while enabling the ability to communicate in English. Simultaneous translation was provided when needed. Group work was structured and mediated by program staff and expert professionals.



## Multi-Regional Task Forces – cont.

- Starting with 28 alumni who participated in 7 groups, at the conclusion, 5 groups consisting of 18 alumni delivered presentations at the alumni program's Digital Global Event in November 2021. The topics were: "Relocation for Jewish Professionals," "How to Make Synagogues Appealing Again After COVID-19," "Working in Small Communities," "Developing Leadership Skills in Teenagers," and "Jewish Tradition Handbook for Families."
- Sixteen of the 18 alumni who completed the process were from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cohort. Of the 18 alumni, 8 were from LATAM, 7 from Europe, and 3 from FSU.
- The MRTF process provided opportunities to develop and strengthen relationships and to practice teamwork skills such as delegation of duties, exercise of leadership and the like.



## Multi-Regional Task Forces – cont.

- Alumni opinion about MRTF success was mixed. Some, but not all, thought it was highly successful. Overall, the alumni who participated said they benefitted more from the peer interactions than from the process.
- Working together was logistically challenging. For example, special arrangements were necessary to accommodate time-zone differences. There were also linguistic challenges.
- Instructions were provided at the beginning of the MRTF project. These included a description of the stages of the MRTF process and program requirements. Additional guidance was offered as the program proceeded. Nevertheless, some alumni said that expectations as to their responsibilities were not made adequately clear.
- Alumni that declined to participate in MRTF said they found it difficult to relate to it. Others cited “discomfort” as the reason for not attending the Global Digital Event.



# Regional Activities





# LATAM

- LATAM provided only limited regional alumni activity because alumni were already actively involved in a network they established (see below), in the Global Alumni Program, and in their jobs. After the conclusion of an online meeting, Leatid staff decided to redirect their efforts to strengthening personal connections with alumni. Staff assisted alumni in the operation of their network, but did not offer additional regional activity.
- The Jewish professionals regional network established by LATAM alumni is called, “**Red de Profesionales Judíos AMLAT**,” an independent initiative that currently has 230 members.
- The independent initiative offered Zoom lectures, meetings, and podcasts consisting of members interviewing each other. The initiative also developed a peer training program called, “**Jevruta**,” in partnership with JDC and the Nahum Goldmann Fellowship, with the goal of providing training and networking opportunities for Jewish professionals.



## LATAM – cont.

- Jevruta created three working groups: “Sustainable Leadership,” “Big Data for Decision Making,” and “Community Organization Planning Methodologies.” Leatid staff directed the program and 43 Red members participated in the working groups.
- Alumni are very proud of, and active in Red.
- The main need expressed by alumni was that of more in-person meetings, both regionally and globally because such meetings were viewed as significant contributors to the creation and strengthening of professional relationships.
- Alumni emphasized the importance of becoming familiar with Jewish communities around the world, deepening their understanding of these communities’ needs, and creating collaborations across Jewish communities.

*“I would like to meet Jewish communities from around the world, produce collaborations for working in various Jewish communities and examining the needs of communities, especially the small Jewish communities.”*



# Europe

- Yesod maintains connections with its alumni, and provides activities, personal guidance and assistance from its own funding sources. Among its programs are:
  - Mentoring and coaching, in addition to those offered by the Kaplan Leadership Program
  - Virtual training workshops
  - “Communities of Practice,” which are themed activities, such as “Seniors in Organizations” and “Jewish Education”
  - Grants for MA studies
- In contrast to the other regional entities and the Global Alumni Program, Yesod services are available only to European alumni who continue to be employed in Jewish organizations.
- Most alumni have been involved in at least one alumni activity since they graduated from the Kaplan Leadership Program.



## Europe – cont.

- Alumni were not able to distinguish between activities provided by Yesod and activities provided by the Kaplan Leadership Program.
- Alumni and Yesod staff perceived the needs of alumni differently. While Yesod staff thought they provided a sufficient range of follow-up activities to alumni through Yesod and other European organizations, alumni expressed interest in pursuing learning and networking opportunities through the Kaplan Program.  
*“There is a large supply of programs in Europe – I go to ‘Limmud,’ etc., but I feel that there is nothing like Kaplan.”*
- Alumni emphasized the importance of peer learning and community development, which is rarely dealt with by other organizations in the Jewish world.  
*“Kaplan is an amazing thing. I will attend everything that I can learn from - everything that has to do with community development.”*



# FSU

- FSU regional staff offered four Zoom peer-updates and collaboration sessions.
- Regional staff kept in touch with alumni and provided personal connections, professional consultations, assistance, support and help with joint projects.
- Alumni reported that regional meetings made it possible to stay connected, consult with others, be updated, think together and exchange ideas. This was particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic as these regional meetings were considered a “safe space” for mutual support.



# Global Alumni Program Achievements

- All alumni indicated that they were in social and professional contact with other alumni, mostly from their region, and to a lesser extent, from other regions. There were some collaborations, many consultations by way of regional WhatsApp groups, and, prior to the pandemic, personal visits.
- **Support during the pandemic:** The Alumni network contributed greatly to alumni efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regional meetings and global meetings and WhatsApp groups facilitated mutual support and the sharing ideas about how to deal with the crisis in Jewish communities.

*“There were many zoom meetings – we shared what’s new, update and give advice. Everyone tells about their projects and then you are asked questions, we exchanged ideas for epidemic times and support.”*



# Global Alumni Program Achievements – cont.

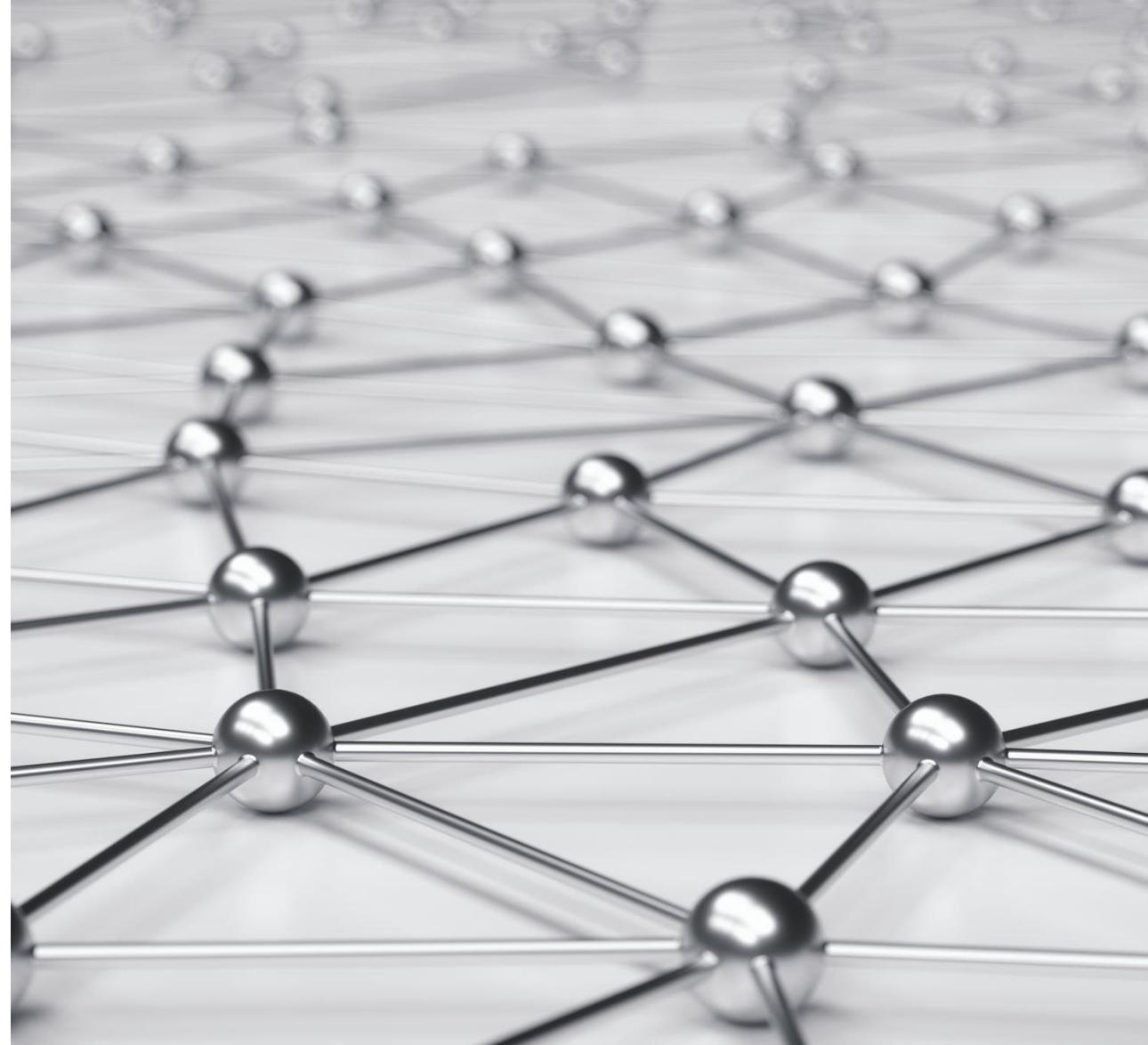
## The Russia-Ukraine War

- With the outbreak of war in Eastern Europe, alumni corresponded via the Global Alumni Program WhatsApp group in order to help facilitate the refugee absorption process. Alumni posted vital information and created channels of assistance through local contacts.
- Five alumni from Europe set up a dedicated task force that proved to be very efficient and helpful:

*“In the first days of the war we formed a leading team, we consulted and encouraged and supported each other. Although I am alone in my community, there are four more people who do the same in other communities and can be consulted. We consulted on a daily basis, around many topics, giving ideas and sharing projects.”*



# Overall Input and Recommendations





## Overall, what did we hear from alumni?

- Alumni enjoyed Alumni Global Program activities, especially the coaching that contributed to their professional development. With the exception of Lior Shoham's presentation, "Public Speaking in the Era of COVID-19," the webinars and the MRTF program contributed more to the enhancement of alumni connections than to individual alumni skills.
- Despite the efforts of the Kaplan team to keep alumni connected and informed, alumni did not grasp the Global Alumni Program's overall vision and felt the initiative lacked continuity.
- The Digital Global Event of November 2021 marked the de facto end of the Global Alumni Program. Due to international factors (COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine War), it is unclear when further alumni program activities will take place. Alumni were not formally informed of the unclarity and expressed disappointment in the lack of closure and unavailability of information about future programming.



## Overall, what did we hear from alumni? – cont.

- Alumni expressed concern that the achievements of the Kaplan Leadership Program may not be maintained, and that alumni connectedness may decline. FSU and European alumni expressed concern, seeing that the 1<sup>st</sup> cohort is no longer part of the Kaplan Leadership Program, and the staff 's focus is mainly on the 3<sup>rd</sup> cohort.
- Alumni expressed interest in an active network, staying in touch with each other, and continuing to advance in their knowledge and skills, principally by keeping up to date with fellow alumni. This need is stronger than their need for activities.
- Alumni wanted opportunities for peer learning through the exchange of knowledge and experiences with fellow alumni from all cohorts, and particularly with alumni from their region.
- Alumni articulated particular interest in content that was unique to the Kaplan Global Leadership Program like aspects of community development and Jewish learning.
- Some alumni were willing to contribute their time to serve as mentors to participants in future cohorts.



# Conclusions



Continuing investment in Kaplan Leadership Program alumni will increase the likelihood of alumni remaining in professions serving Jewish communities for longer periods of time



Establishing an active and vibrant alumni network requires professional construction, according to the extensive professional knowledge accumulated in the area



# Conclusions – cont.



The Kaplan Leadership Program's unique characteristics and the diversity of its participants pose challenges to the operation of the Global Alumni Program:

The small number of alumni limits the variety of activities that can be offered.

Gaps in English proficiency prevent fuller communication among alumni, especially regarding remote communication such as was necessary during the height of the pandemic.

Financial resources for maintenance of the Global Alumni Program are limited.

The pool of alumni volunteers able to contribute time to the program is insufficient.

The Russia-Ukraine War has created an uncomfortable situation concerning the connection between alumni from those two countries.



# Conclusions – cont.



The lack of a common language (poor command of English) was a fundamental obstacle precisely in the online activities that had to be offered during the COVID pandemic.



Despite the instability surrounding the Russian-Ukraine war and the waves of the COVID pandemic, it is recommended to design the goals and objectives of the program, around the needs of the graduates, as detailed in this document and in the previous research reports.

The appendix at the end of this presentation contains useful recommendations and sources of information for establishing, sustaining and improving alumni organizations.



# Recommendations

## Recommendations for the **immediate** term:

1. The most significant need is to support FSU alumni. This need is less pressing in Europe and Latin America because the Yesod alumni network in Europe is well established, and the alumni of LATAM have established an active regional network on their own.
2. Rethink the feasibility of the global program. Considering the various barriers, both the structural barriers of the Kaplan program (the small group of graduates, communication problems in English, limited resources) and the global barriers - the pandemic and the war, perhaps it will be more beneficial to concentrate the efforts in each area separately.



# Recommendations – cont.

## Recommendations for the **immediate** term:

3. Focus efforts on the development and maintenance of the network and connections. The most important need is to know where people are and what they are doing.
4. Engage with alumni who expressed interest in contributing time to mentoring participants in future cohorts. Invite these alumni to lead thinking groups, to write posts for the alumni newsletter, and to potentially lead the Global Alumni Network in a paid capacity.



# Recommendations – cont.

## Recommendations for the **intermediate** term:

1. Expand the Kaplan Leadership Program website to offer content on aspects of community development and Jewish learning, including recommendation of articles and recorded lectures.
2. Promote specific alumni networking opportunities according to common professional interests and roles, e.g., community center managers, educators, community organization directors, etc.
3. Consider means of enabling face-to-face get togethers, both regional and global, these are essential to the longevity of the network.
4. Synchronize regional and global programs and use uniform criteria for network inclusion for alumni from all regions.

# Thank you

[brookdale.jdc.org.il/en](http://brookdale.jdc.org.il/en)





# Best Practices: Alumni Networks and Communities

These recommendations and best practices are based on the following sources: the Wexner Heritage Alumni Program, the Schusterman Family Foundation, [ejewishphilanthropy.com](http://ejewishphilanthropy.com), and the JDC-ELKA digital leaders' alumni network.

- 1. Create a vision** for the alumni organization based on its theory of change. **Define the goals** of alumni programming and follow through by **developing a strategic plan**.
- 2. Draw upon alumni input when setting the agenda.** In developing alumni programming, it is of utmost importance to conduct research concerning alumni preferences.
- 3. Involve alumni in programming.** Involving the alumni serves two purposes: expanding the capacity of your alumni community beyond your existing resources and providing them with valuable leadership opportunities. Although working with alumni can be challenging because they usually work full time and may not be experts in programming, their insights can be invaluable. Invite them to brain-storm specific questions, challenges, and decisions, rather than abstract goals. Recruiting alumni for a short-term, time- and task-based committee, is more beneficial than creating a formal management structure. Additional ways to involve alumni include:
  - Appointing an alumni coordinator to drive alumni programming
  - Establish a mentoring program that matches alumni mentors with current program participants
  - Asking alumni to help with program recruitment by providing alumni with resources to conduct interviews, to disseminate information via social media, and to host information sessions.



4. **Maintain up-to-date alumni contact information.**
5. **Invest in the alumni network.** Network maintenance requires constant investment to conceive, plan, and produce in-person and online meetings, maintain a digital platform, keep in touch with alumni, check their needs, and develop responses to their requests. For example, the JDC-ELKA Digital Leaders network employs 1.5 individuals to maintain alumni network activities.
6. **A Facebook group** is essential for maintaining the network. Moderating the group is a professional methodology that can be acquired. The FB group moderator brings content, recruits leaders, makes sure the group is alive and connects people. The FB group serves as a springboard for real actions.
7. **Demonstrate presence.** Send periodic newsletters with information that is relevant to the Alumni goals and interests; maintain a lively website and social media channels that provide information, invite responses, and help everyone stay updated. **Continuous activity** is crucial for sending the message that the network is live and active.
8. **Keep all channels of communication open.** Seek input and feedback through in-person conversations, focus groups, email, social media, surveys and every new means that becomes available. Frequent contact is the best way to identify trends. Alumni feedback may be surprising, but it will also help identify unmet needs.



- 9. Organize reunions and other gatherings** that will bring alumni into close and meaningful contact with the alumni organization and with each other. Meetings should combine social activities, opportunities for peer learning ("brain dates", program fairs, thinking groups), and include new content. All are important for the effectiveness, appeal and continuity of an alumni network. Virtual activities are not sufficient to keep an alumni network vibrant over the long term.
- 10. Integrating the alumni community.** The alumni community should not consist of disconnected people from different cohorts and regions, but rather an integrated and diverse group in which alumni communicate frequently. This will strengthen the sense of community among alumni, and the alumni organization will gain access to its most valuable resource—the alumni themselves!
- 11. Diversify alumni programming.** There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to alumni programming. The alumni organization should create offerings that are unique to its alumni community, reflect its shared vision, and create multiple "touch-points." If the alumni organization creates multiple offerings, it increases the likelihood that members of the alumni community will find at least one option that is appealing.
- 12. Demonstrate your gratitude.** The alumni organization must express its thanks to alumni for giving their time, talent and wisdom to the organization. The organization's appreciation should be demonstrated at every level and at every opportunity.



# Additional Resources

- 1. The Schusterman Foundation Playbook.**  
<https://www.schusterman.org/playbooks/alumni/>
- 2. Creating an Alumni Association:** <http://alumnichannel.com/blog/how-to-create-an-alumni-association/>
- 3. Peer Networking and Place-based Initiatives:**  
<https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/finalrep160-sum.pdf>
- 4. Successful Alumni Networks:** <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/successful-alumni-networks-from-the-round-table-to-the-reunion>