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Institutional Memory of the Nivonim Program at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin

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Institutional Memory of the *Nivonim*
Program at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin

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A Practitioner Paper

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Abstract

Institutional Memory of the *Nivonim* program at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin

Aviva (Robin) Schwartz

The purpose of this study is to explore how institutional memory for the *Nivonim* program is maintained at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Transitions in key leadership positions like unit heads are extremely common, and therefore cannot be allowed to become a constraint in the program's development. The research process consisted of 31 interviews with camping professionals within the Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, as well as other Jewish and secular camps. A theme that emerged from the conversations was that summer camps struggle with transmitting institutional and individual memory. In order to alleviate this problem and appeal to different *Rashei Aidah* (unit heads), a multipronged approach that combines oral and written transmission of knowledge and moves from individual to institutional transmission of knowledge must be implemented for the *Nivonim* program in Camp Ramah in Wisconsin.

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Introduction

To some, overnight camp is a weird psychological science experiment of what happens when a group of youth spend the summer away from their parents. However, those who grew up at overnight summer camps, especially those who devoted their emerging adulthood years to the cause, understand how complex and all-consuming it can be. Each camp is distinct in nature, and yet there are several inherent challenges that face most camps. One given that inspired this research is the high rate of staff turnover that exists within the camp structure. Summer camps thrive on young adults giving back to youth, bringing their excitement from their college learning or post high-school experiences, and wanting to impact future generations. Camp Ramah in Wisconsin's success relies on the continuation of individuals from campers to counselors to members of the leadership team. However, according to the Director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, replacing 50% of the 23 years and under staff is considered a strong retention year. Furthermore, most employees of the mid-level leadership team remain in one position for only 1 or 2 summers. Thus, significant attention goes towards recruitment and training each year. As a result of staff turnover and their upward mobility, the documentation and transmission of institutional memory become instrumental in preparing staff for their roles in leadership positions.

I have spent the past six summer working at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, each summer increasing my understanding of the educational impact and growth potential of camp through both mundane interactions and *epic* experiences created for campers. Having spent this most recent summer as the *Rosh Aidah* (unit head) for *Nivonim* (the oldest camper unit- 16 year olds), I had the opportunity to witness a part of camp that is a bridge between camper and staff member, and the experience of a counselor to that of mid-level camp leadership. As a *Rosh*

Aidah, part of my role is to supervise, empower, and coordinate all aspects of the campers and counselors (who range in ages from 20-23) connected to the *Nivonim* group.

Nivonim is kept a mystery from the rest of the camp, intentionally or not. The knowledge of how to run the program is "individual memory" rather than "institutional memory," and many begin to understand the staff positions through observation. For example, on the night the campers arrived this past summer, everyone was excited to be in *Nivonim* for the first time and participated in a traditional, intense, and slightly over-dramatic activity that introduces the campers to the program. The campers were encouraged to "commit" to the *Nivonim* experience, and hand-in their cell phones. I chose to have staff run this introduction, which began strongly and quickly deteriorated as the campers felt belittled and disrespected, as if singled out from previous *Nivonim*. Unfortunately, this jump started a (probably inevitable) dynamic between the campers, the staff, and the "camp" as a whole that would continue throughout the summer. Reflecting on this experience, I could have anticipated this reaction. As the leader of the unit, I had not yet had the time to develop a strong working relationship with the staff. I was trying to empower staff and did so at the expense of the campers.

One more example is that the last few *Rashei Nivonim* had a staff member designated to "logistics." None of the previous staff members I spoke to clearly explained the necessity or the responsibilities of this role, and so I did not make the assignment. However, during the summer, I often found myself overloaded with logistics. I wonder if the tasks and execution of this "logistics role" person had been codified, perhaps I would have foreseen the benefit, reoriented my responsibilities, and lowered the staff's anxiety by helping the group run smoother.

I believe in the power and potential impact of each summer at camp. To succeed, staff need to understand the program's objectives, and campers need clear expectations, so that the

logistics and scheduling run smoothly and the participants can focus on the program's life changing and transformative potential. I recognize the incredible power and opportunity that summer camp plays in shaping American Judaism, and my responsibility as an educator. Thus, a summer spent playing "catch-up" to what should have been done yesterday wastes opportunities and deprives the participants (both staff and campers) of an expected and deserved impact. If we are spending time during the summer on pre-summer work, we are missing critical opportunities.

Daniel Isaacman, a long time academic and Jewish educator, produced an extensive survey of Jewish summer camping in the 1960s which includes a wide overview of types of Jewish camps that were sponsored by organizations. He views the "fact that [camp] controls the child's environment for 24 hours a day, 8 weeks a year" as the key element that distinguishes the all-encompassing educational potential at camp. "A good camp can create a Jewish atmosphere, impart knowledge, motivate commitment to a Jewish way of life, and demonstrate the relevance of Judaism to the child's experience" (Isaacman, 246). This is not a task that is taken lightly, and the potential impact on future generations is high. The Conservative Movement of Judaism has invested great amounts of resources, funds, scholars, and responsibility to the network of Ramah Camps that exist throughout North America. Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, (one of the seminaries for professional leaders and clergy in the Conservative Movement), wrote: "I am firmly convinced that in terms of social impact, in terms of lives affected, Ramah is the most important venture ever undertaken by the Seminary" (Cohen, 122). The first Ramah camp, Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, was established in 1947 as a "mission- and vision- driven enterprise" (Keysar and Kosmin, 9).

From its inception, Camp Ramah was run intentionally as an educational experience for the campers and the staff. Staff at Camp Ramah are to be Jewish educators, demonstrating what

living a Jewish life can look like while attending to child safety and youth development. Staff members are not hired to be identical, thus they demonstrate many different possibilities for campers and staff to connect to their Judaism in ways that are meaningful to them.

Camp Ramah in Wisconsin is a complex, multi-faceted, multi-level institution, with many departments that are crucial to the success of the camp. This research will focus on the *Nivonim* (literal translation as wise-ones) program at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin whose objectives, daily schedule and program are distinct from the rest of the camp. The challenge at hand is that too many *Rashei Nivonim* anecdotally note that they are not as prepared as they could be to begin the summer. Furthermore, many accept that the job is a two year position, as one cannot really build momentum until they have understood what the task is. Particularly for *Nivonim*, since a majority of the program is at the discretion of the *Rosh Aidah,* determining a better system to acclimate the incoming *Rosh Nivonim* to the position is crucial.

It is important to describe the transition system currently in place at Ramah Wisconsin. At the end of their summer, each Rosh Aidah completes a *Doch,* a report, summarizing their summer, including aspects pertaining to campers and staff, the various programs and logistics of the summer. This is both a reflective and summative process for the outgoing *Rosh Aidah,* as well as a document to help orient the incoming *Rosh Aidah* as s/he prepares for the following summer, either working with those kids or in that particular *Aidah (*unit). When it comes to the *Nivonim* program, the *Doch* has taken on more of a narrative and reflective format. Typically the unit head creates several other charts, calendars, and documents that help orient themselves and their staff to the program. Many of these documents are passed onto the next *Rosh Nivonim.* Many of the respondents to this research who have worked within Ramah Wisconsin, both as a *Rosh Nivonim* or at the administrative level, commented on the sophistication of this method and

helpfulness in expectation setting. In addition to the written reports, the camp director serves as the primary person who imparts previous experiences of the camp to the incoming *Rosh Aidah.* While the current system at Ramah Wisconsin is one of the more sophisticated in the field, it continues to grapple with many of the same questions that remain throughout the camping field.

Researcher

This research is directly tied to me, as I experienced the current system of turnover and transfer of institutional memory when transitioning into the role as the *Rosh Aidah* (unit head) of *Adat HaNivonim*. My history and connection to the subject matter affects the research process and outcomes. I have come to understand how the program and the camp processes function, both theoretically and practically. Thus, when exploring different options with respondents from within the Camp Ramah system, as well as other camp scenarios, I have been able to internalize the content within context. Furthermore, I am invested in the program, the people involved, and its success, such that I am returning as the *Rosh Aidah* for the *Nivonim* program upon completion of this research, in hopes of implementing any positive changes resulting from this project.

I have extensive experience and connection to *Nivonim* from different angles: in 2008 as a camper, in 2013 as a counselor, and in 2015 as a *Rosh Aidah*[1]. My roles in camp might have played into these research-focused conversations, including both my choices of whom to speak with and the course of the conversations themselves. Many of the respondents either worked for or alongside me throughout the six summers that I have been a staff member at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. This is important to state upfront, as in some ways it increases comfort for honest

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[1] Here is the full scope of my time working at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin: I began my years as a camper at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin at age 14 (following six summers at other Ramah camps); four years as a *Madricha Chevratit;* two years as a Rosh *Aidah* (first for Solelim, most recently for *Nivonim)*

conversations, while in other ways it could affect the integrity of the responses. For example, those who I have positive relationships with, and have worked with before can reminisce on positive and/or shared growing experiences. Furthermore, the level of commitment to the institution demonstrated through 6 summers of employment does not go unnoticed by the camp community. However, should someone feel bashful to mention an encounter we disagreed on, either face to face or quietly, this could limit the information shared in that particular interview.

Overall, my *insider* knowledge from the camp is a significant advantage in this research process and would be conducted differently were I an outside consultant. Because I understand different aspects and possibilities in the camp, I can sift through responses, potential ideas, and information from the various respondents, as well as internalize how the responses fit into the context of camp. I know that the camp cannot rely on the knowledge gained from being a *Nivonim* camper as a way to prepare a staff member to run the program. My colleagues know that I enter these conversations with camp staff and professionals only with the intention of assisting camps to improve their capacity to reach their educational goals.

Camp Ramah

The National Ramah Commission governs aspects of the Ramah Camps that exist across North America. There are currently nine overnight camps that run semi-independently, yet all affiliate as a part of the Jewish Conservative Movement[2] and represent a similar set of ideals and

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[2] A Conservative Judaism can be defined as a mediating approach which combines elements of the Orthodox movement and Reform movements (Sklare, 1985). One of it's mottos**,** "Tradition and Change," demonstrates the tension between living according to the Halacha (Jewish law) and modernizing with society. Historically, the Conservative movement grew rapidly but today, its membership is consistently declining. Some point to this tension as one of the largest challenges of the Conservative Movement and may be an underlying factor in Camp Ramah and the Nivonim's challenge to define its purpose and process.

beliefs. Youth may start coming to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin for two weeks the summer before

they enter 4th grade, followed by two years of four week camp experiences. Those entering 7th

grade begin to attend this camp for eight weeks each summer. The oldest campers are entering

11th grade, *Nivonim*. The entire camp, except for *Nivonim,* functions more or less on a similar

schedule with set periods during the day filled with swimming, sports, electives, and classes, and

finishes the day with an evening activity with their age group.

      The overall hierarchical structure of the camp begins with the counselors who are

typically 18-20 years old. Once an individual is at least the age of a 3rd year staff member (20

typically), they can be a counselor for the *Nivonim Aidah*. Additionally, members of the staff

who are at least 19 years old (the age of a second year counselor) can be *Rashei Anaf* (division

head) supervisors for a particular specialty department and its staff across camp. Consequently,

5th year or older staff members may have the opportunity, to work as a *Rosh Aidah* and

supervise staff members for a particular *Aidah* (age unit). Both the *Rashei Aidah* and the *Rashei*

Anaf are members of the *Hanhalah* (leadership team), along with other members of the camp

community including, the director, assistant director, and program director. The director and

assistant director are full time, year round employees and play a significant role in vision and

goal setting for the camp as a whole, as well as in mentoring, supporting, and managing the

Hanhalah, and by extension, each staff member at camp.

Nivonim Program

      A significant aspect of the *Nivonim* camper experience are the privileges and

responsibilities that they receive. This is also the year of the camp's Counselor-in-Training

program where *Nivonim* campers are assigned to a cabin, and they spend a few meals a week and

occasionally other activities with their campers. The *Nivonim* CITs have staff training programs throughout the summer ranging from camper safety to discussions on what it means to be Jewish educators and to plan programs for their campers. The *Nivonim* program also includes service projects in nearby town as well as "internships" throughout camp in different *Anafim* (departments), such as swimming, sports, and even the special needs vocational program. A reality of the program is that while there are key elements that exist every summer, a majority of the summer is open to the interpretations of the Rosh *Nivonim* and the rest of the staff. This can be incredibly exciting to some and very overwhelming to others.

The *Nivonim* program is distinct from the rest of camp in several ways. The first is that the majority of the educational opportunities and Jewish learning experiences happen throughout their day and are planned by their counselors. As distinct from the formalized classes that the rest of the camp receives, there are increased opportunities for the counselors to share something they are passionate about, and for the *Nivonim* campers to learn in more experiential and integrated ways. A key component of the *Nivonim* program is the element of being *different* from the rest of camp. Thus, there schedule is much more flexible, and open, leaving space for the staff and campers to mold their own experience.

The purpose of this research is to invest the time, people power, and resources to further enhance the *Nivonim* program and staff experience. Increasing our institutional memory of the *Nivonim* program and transferring that knowledge can enrich the experience of the youth, strengthen the learning of the staff and maximize the impact of their skills and talents.

Conceptual Framework

There is not an extensive field of research regarding the camping movement. There is also a lack of research regarding fields that have inherent turnover built into the context of the work. Thus, it is challenging to identify sources and find knowledge on how Camp Ramah can address this question. Exploring the effect of high turnover on an organization and how integral it is within the camp structure is crucial. Furthermore, since this turnover is inherent to camp, it is critical to understand the role of organizational memory and how it is transferred in order to determine what and how it must be passed on each summer.

Staff Turnover

Staff turnover is an inherent reality of the camping field, however there is little research that directly relates to this field and thus I have analyzed research in related areas regarding staff turnover. There is widespread acceptance that staff turnover has some significant effect on an organization, regardless of the context or industry. In some contexts, transitioning positions can have negative effects and create setbacks or slow down work and progress. However, Ton and Huckman (2008), of the Harvard Business school, site several studies from the 1980s that show that turnover can bring in fresh ideas and new perspectives that motivate the organization and employees into their next stage. Some claim that the quantity of information and knowledge needed to successfully assume a new position can affect the overall turnover process. If a staff member's role requires a specific set of skills, the challenge with turnover would be to train the new employee in those skills, and the impact of the transition is limited as the new employee replacing the former.

Specifying the role and context within which a transition takes place becomes crucial to success. Transitions of those in leadership roles tend to have more distinctive elements and greater impact on other employees/colleagues. The CEB, a "best practice insight and technology company" that provides support at all levels of challenges facing innovative corporations today, notes that a successful leadership transition can benefit the leader by reducing the amount of time it will take for him/her to yield full productivity (CEB, 2). This assumes that a newly transitioning employee does not yield full productivity as they learn the ropes. Within the context of this research, when one transitions into a mid-level leadership position at camp, they do not start the summer at full productivity, as they attempt to learn their role.

When transitioning, it is necessary for the *Rosh Nivonim* to understand the context within which they are transitioning. The CEB details four main types of transitions that are transferable to the camp context. They are mostly dependent on the employee or situation that occurred before the hiring:

- *Replacing an Icon* – following a leader who was highly revered
- *Following a Train Wreck*- following a leader who failed
- *Jump Start* –following a good but not amazing or noteworthy leader
- *Breaking Ground* – transitioning into a newly created position

Understanding the history as well as the impression and perceptions of the rest of the organization is crucial. In a camp setting, there are many ways each new summer is an entirely new machine. And yet, there are clear expectations that travel from one summer to the next. Ideals, philosophy, goals, strengths and any repercussions are often felt from summer to summer. For example, if the previous *Rosh Nivonim* has been there for several summers, s/he can be looked to as an "icon", often instilling the subconscious expectation that the way s/he ran the program will continue as such. Should a transition take place without replacing an "icon" or a

"train wreck," the CEB still encourages a change in the program or shift taking place quickly. Once a staff member at camp is in a role for more then 1-2 years, s/he is seen by younger campers and staff as "having been there forever!"

There is also the possibility of an icon ending her/his term on a train wreck summer. This means that someone is viewed by camp as an "icon," yet leaves camp having a publicly challenging summer. This type of experience can have the largest impact on the subsequent summer for two reasons. The first is that after any train wreck summer, the reigns are tightened and much more attention is given from elsewhere in camp. The second is that the mentality of "no one is safe from having a train wreck- not even an icon" leaves everyone a bit weary and skeptical. As the new *Rosh Nivonim* prepares for his/her summer, it is important to understand the position at which the previous *Rosh Nivonim* ended their work.

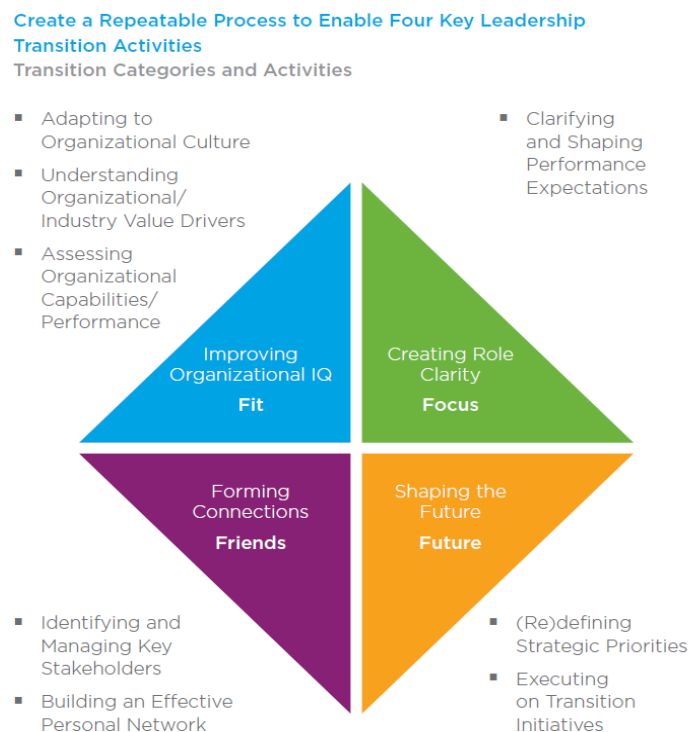**Figure 1: Beyond an Executive-Centric Transition Approach**
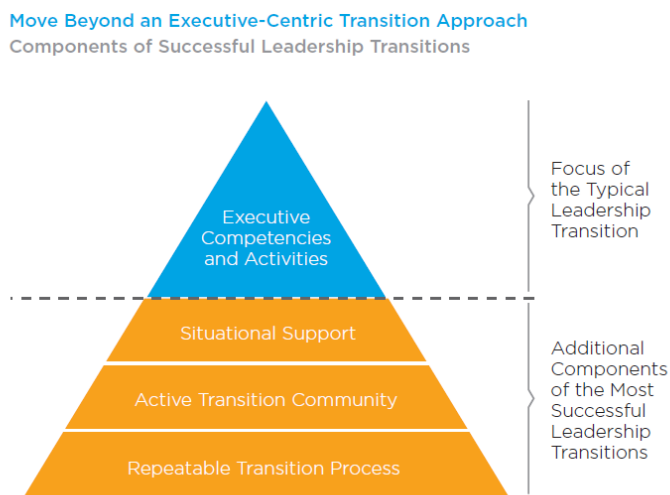
-CEB, 3

It is important when thinking about turnover and transitions to identify areas on which organizations will focus. According to the figure above, at the minimum, a transition for a person in a leadership position consists of assisting in relaying information about activities. However, it

is highly recommended that support and guidance regarding the context of the transition be a focus as well. Furthermore, organizations typically see these transitions as tasks for the individual (CEB, 6), and rely on her/his ability to adapt and mold. However, CEB recommends that it is the role of the organization to make a transition successful, rather than relying solely on the new employee. Similarly, identifying how camp structures provide continual support, and discovering innovative tools and approaches to transition leaders are essential to success at Camp Ramah. While some elements of the transition system at Camp Ramah are already codified, the transition process should still be evaluated for any gaps or areas to strengthen.

Figure 2: Repeatable Process to Enable Four Key Leadership Transition Activities

Create a Repeatable Process to Enable Four Key Leadership Transition Activities
Transition Categories and Activities

- Adapting to Organizational Culture
- Understanding Organizational/ Industry Value Drivers
- Assessing Organizational Capabilities/ Performance

- Clarifying and Shaping Performance Expectations

Improving Organizational IQ
Fit

Creating Role Clarity
Focus

Forming Connections
Friends

Shaping the Future
Future

- Identifying and Managing Key Stakeholders
- Building an Effective Personal Network

- (Re)defining Strategic Priorities
- Executing on Transition Initiatives

-CEB, 9

The figure above demonstrates the need for a multi-pronged approach and multi-layered system to successfully transition someone into a new position and/or program. According to CEB, all four of the elements defined in this figure are essential in a transition. These include:

acclimating the individual to the organization culture, values, and driving forces; clarifying the role and expectations of the position; defining future strategic plans; providing connections and opportunities for these individuals to build relationships, both to better integrate into the organization as well as to increase their understanding of the existing interconnectedness. While these activities are created for a new employee to a company, they can also be related to a returning employee to a new role at camp, as each program has a way of being that is distinctive from other sections of the camp.

It is crucial to understand the times that the mainstream turnover narrative deviate from the summer camp context. Much of the turnover narrative describes how turnover is non-routine and will "occur due to an organizational crisis or the departure of a founder or visionary leader" ("Capturing to Power of Leadership Change," 6). While there are definitely turnovers of this type at a camp, they usually involve the year-round long term employees and leaders. This is very distinct from the high rates of turnover that occur among the summer-hired staff members. That being said, a key part of any successful transition includes focusing on what happens immediately after the employee begins working. The literature makes a strong recommendation for a "social contract" between the employee and the leadership team or board (depending on the make-up of the organization) as to the current priorities, roles, and procedures that will help the organization and the new employee start off strong. Furthermore, transitions are seen as great opportunities for strategic planning and assessments of programs and systems. In some aspects, constant turnover can hinder the strategic planning, but in other ways it provides clear markers for different foci and attempts at continually improving the status quo.

A popular term in turnover is succession planning. Succession planning focuses on the leadership or head executives of an organization, however there are some elements that transfer

into transitioning *Rosh Aidah* positions. Included in understanding succession planning is the importance of understanding the distinction between "change" and "transition." "Where change is external and situational….transition is the internal process of how one responds to the change" (Price et al, 8). These can provide fruitful opportunities for vision setting, as well as assessing progress of current aspirations. Some of the key questions to explore according to the *ETI: Departure Defined Transition Toolkit* (by the Executive Transition Initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation) are:

- What is our vision for this organization?
- How closely do current operations fit that vision?
- What is your business model and what skills does your new executive need to implement it?
- What kind of executive can implement our vision while addressing operational needs?
- Are we prepared to guide and support the new executive?

While some of these questions do not directly translate to change in midlevel camp leadership, there are aspects from these questions that are important for camps to grapple with. Specific to this research, continually clarifying the vision for the *Nivonim* program (and in other situations for each unit and department of the camp system) is a worthwhile step between summers and certainly between different units. Connected with that step is an opportunity to evaluate if the operations and focus of the daily program actually align with the identified and stated vision. This can help clarify the skills, adaptations, personnel needed for that particular summer for that particular group of children. Finally, it is crucial not to forget the last step in this process, which is determining a system that will help in the transition so that the entire organization benefits from the new summer. An advantage that camps have over other organizations is the incredibly high probability that the hiring decision makers know the new hires from many different angles and have an idea of what their challenges and successes might be. Thus, the task is how to best

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support and guide that new leader in the context of that camp that summer. And, if one accepts

Price's understanding of the transition as the internal process of how one responds to change,

then a way to assess the new leader's thoughts, feelings and reactions is critical. The challenge

includes finding the balance between tailoring the support to a particular individual while staying

within the reality of camp, which has a finite amount of resources.

Organizational Memory

Organizational memory "is embodied in the memory of distributed individuals and the

relationships between them" (Carley, 42). The knowledge that an organization has gained over

the years cannot rest in one person's hands, particularly as it pertains to various programs in an

organization. When the "repository for knowledge" lies only in the personnel themselves, the

challenge is greater to identify the key personnel, to ensure that the institution learns through

experience, and to maintain the knowledge despite any transitions or changes (Carley, 41).

Much of the literature reinforced the importance of maintaining institutional memory and

implementing structures to do so successfully (Gunning, 2015; Carley, 1992; Fincher, 1987).

There are many reasons why organizations struggle with documenting institutional work, daily

activity, and decisions. Some of these reasons include lack of time or intention, confidential

information, and genuinely lack of background knowledge due to classified information to a

certain hierarchical level (Fincher, 1987). Fincher even mentioned that inter-organizational

politics sometimes causes internationally poor note-taking skills, or political deals that require

minimal paper trails. Maintaining institutional knowledge can simplify perceptions, help teams

focus together and facilitate further documentation and proper coding of institutional experience

(Fincher, 1987). Ensuring that reports are "well-organized, well-written, and more meaningful"

will help to improve institutional memory and transmission to those who need the information (Fincher, 1987). It has been proven that employees in new leadership roles who have a clearer understanding of their jobs tend to meet expectations quicker and spend more time on future leaders, the clear sign that they have greater knowledge of their role (Dragoni et al., 2013).

Another crucial aspect in maintaining knowledge of the functioning and culture of the institution is note taking and daily documentation of activities and events. The daily pace of an organization can play into the inability to document and code all that they might want or is ideal. Others have even gone so far as to claim intentional lack of institutional memory by some administrators and chief executives (Fincher, 1987). "Improvement of institutional memory would follow quickly and easily from well-organized, well-written, and more meaningful reports, memoranda, minutes." This demonstrates the notion that institutional memory is not only the physical documents, but the way they are used. Once created and successfully disseminated, such documentation will lead to a better understanding of the institutional knowledge across the board among parties who need to understand it (Fincher, 434). While the camp leadership likely has a vision, strategic plan, and understanding of how most aspects of camp have and should continue to be implemented, when this information is not effectively transmitted to the staff on the ground, then its usefulness is compromised.

It is clear through the research that transitions, although widely studied in the corporate world, are underdeveloped in non-profits, particularly in camps. Furthermore, when designing a strong system of turnover, the organization cannot rely solely on the incoming professional or the outgoing employee because of the need to consider the broader context. Additionally, the research seems to dictate a multi-level and multi-step approach to transitioning. One that will include different stages, perhaps different modes of transmission, and likely different employees

or people involved. Furthermore, key to the transition is actually maintaining the institutional memory, including during and after summers, as a reflective process.

Methodology

This research was driven by the need to better pass on the *Nivonim* program to the next *Rosh Aidah.* Every so often, there is someone who invests their entire self into the *Nivonim* program and explores each crevice, question, and opportunity. Jacob, the current Camp Director, was fully committed and had a strong vision for the potential of the *Nivonim* program. Up until this past summer, all of the *Rashei Aidah* since Jacob have had the privilege of either working for him or being a camper during his reign as *Rosh Nivonim.* Thus the vision itself and ability to emulate his plan is dwindling. The distance and loss of understanding only grows each summer, increasing the need for Jacob to determine and codify that real vision for the *Nivonim* program.

Thus, the purpose of this research project is to understand how the institutional memory of the *Nivonim* program can best be passed on from one *Rosh Aidah* to the next in order to increase the success of the program each summer. As a *Rosh Nivonim* typically works an average of 2 summers, the process of acclimating one to the position is fairly constant. Components of this include determining what the staff and program require of the *Rosh Aidah,* and how previous *Rashei Nivonim* have prepared for the role. This question includes understanding the key components of the program that must be transmitted as well as determining what shifts in the program itself might help to ease the transition process.

This research process has formal and informal elements. As it is a practitioner's report, I am integrally involved in the camp and bring a set of expertise to the conversations and research process. Elements of the project follow formal protocol, while other aspects use informal

conversations and relationships to reach real outcomes and challenge traditional assumptions. The process began with a series of conversations between myself, the director and assistant director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. We began by discussing the general expectations for the camp and the Community Development and Planning (CDP) Graduate Program at Clark University requirements for degree completion. Discussions also included topics suggested by various parties in an attempt to find a project that will be beneficial to the camp, engaging for the researcher, and fulfill the program requirements.

Once the focus was determined, the research phase began. Contextual and literary resources were accessed through the help of the internet, library, and professional recommendations. Conversations with 31 people assisted in the overall understanding of the complexity of the topic and the affect that people's roles have perceptions and understandings of a program and its process. The literature guided the topics of conversations, focuses and my interpretation of the responses. The conversations were between 30-60 minutes, with a majority lasting from 30-45 minutes. As participants live throughout the world, conversations varied between phone calls and video skype, and extensive- typed notes were taking. Please see Appendix A for the questions that guided each interview.

Respondents

The interviewees fall into the following categories based on their roles in camps or their professions. Categories[3]:

- Previous *Rashei Nivonim* equivalents – 7 participants
- People in Director or Administrative Roles of camps- 9 participants
- Previous *Rashei Aidah* (any **BUT** not Nivonim)- 7 participants
- Previous *Tzevet Nivonim* (both *Chevratii* and *Miktzoi*)- 4 participants
- *Madrichim* who were on *Tzevet Nivonim* more than once – 2 participants
- Academics/Other Professionals- 2 participants

The conversations with the counselors reached a point of saturation, where little new information was gleaned from new information. However, in general, each conversation with a *Rosh Aidah* (or equivalent) and membership of the leadership team of the camp gleaned new and helpful information. Thus more work could be done through more in-depth conversations with those spoken to or increasing the scope of those involved.

Data Analysis

The conversations were loosely transcribed and then coded for common themes, topics, and sentiments. As the respondents came from very distinct areas of the camp structure, it is crucial to differentiate their answers within the context of where they specialize in camp. Thus, the data from the conversations were coded based on topics and themes, identified both through the literature and the conversations themselves, while differentiating the roles of the respondents.

Once the data was finalized and a list of recommendations created, I determined which "best practices" could work within the Camp Ramah in Wisconsin structure and which ones I

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[3] Please note, many of the people involved in this research have experienced camp from several different perspectives and roles, and could thus have fit into several of these categories listed above. For the sake of the research and the discussions they were placed into the category from whose perspective it seemed most relevant and/or recent.

would recommend for consideration or implementation. Upon completion of this project, a decision will be made by the camp leadership regarding how to take into account the findings of this research. Implementation will begin this coming summer when I have the opportunity to direct the program once again and better prepare to pass on the institutional knowledge in a systematic way, with a goal of more successfully transitioning to *Rosh Nivonim* 2017.

Furthermore, direct observation notes help build the narrative of the experience of being the *Rosh Aidah* for Nivonim at Camp Ramah this past summer. While looking at the experiences of particular *Rosh Aidah* in this position, the ultimate goal is to determine what could have enhanced their transition into the role and increased their success in the position, and ultimately the success of the summer for the staff and campers.

This project is a part of the long trajectory of the *Nivonim* program, and the relevance of the conclusions should be modified as camp changes over the years. Input from others is a necessary part of ensuring that the implementation of the programs is as strong and impactful as desired. It should also be noted that I used a snowball method and personal network based approaches to access respondents. This research could have continued as there are more people connected to the *Nivonim* program, both within Camp Ramah Wisconsin structure as well as in programs similar to it. However, for the purpose of limitation as well as time constraints a cap was placed at around 30 participants.

Findings

The importance of context and institutional memory processes, as described in the literature, yielded the breadth of questions and guided the conversations I conducted. The perspectives uncovered through this research were mostly consistent with the literature's emphasis on the need to create multi-pronged processes for transitions. There was a clear feeling from the previous *Rashei Nivonim* that individuals wanted to be more prepared before the first summer, and felt there was untapped potential within the realm of the program to create powerful experiences. Furthermore, each organization uses a slightly different system of maintaining institutional memory and aiding turnover, however few were satisfied with the system they had. The challenge within the camp setting is that the high turnover creates a need for stronger institutional memory practices, however individuals respond to and search for different modes and thus a *one-sized fits all* approach will not suffice.

No One is Totally "Ready", so You Just Have to Deal

The job of *Rosh Nivonim* is fluid, fluctuates in execution depending on the leadership style of the individual, is responsive to particular staff and camper dynamics, and involves the broader camp initiatives that are happening that summer. There are distinct challenges to which the *Rosh* Nivonim must adjust, much like shifts that exist for other *Rashei Aidah.* However, the overwhelming response was that incoming *Rashei Nivonim* feel unprepared, either more than other *Aidot* (units) or in distinct ways. When asked if he felt prepared, one previous *Rosh Nivonim* stated, "No, I didn't. I felt intimidated and not prepared. [Although] I felt reasonably confident as a *Rosh Aidah.*" This expresses the combination of emotions and reflections that exist about the *Nivonim* program. While this individual felt pretty confident about his skills as a

Rosh Aidah for another age group, this only partially helped in feeling comfortable with the role of *Rosh Nivonim.* That being said, he did not feel paralyzed, but seemed to accept that he would have to experience the job before fully grasping the task.

There were differences in the conversations about how the shift from counselor to first time *Rosh Aidah* compared with transitioning into the role of *Rosh Nivonim.* Some people, including those who has been *Rashei Nivonim* as well as those who spoke from a director or administrative perspective, saw the transition from a *Rosh Aidah* of another group to *Nivonim* (or equivalent) as a significant shift. However, a relatively equal number of respondents saw it as simply an appropriate, but not huge, next step. That being said, there was agreement that there were significant aspects involved in being *Rosh Nivonim* that were not experienced by other *Rashei Aidah*. These aspects include the difference in the program (including schedule, time, and programming), the difference in staff members, and the general role on the *Hanhalah*.

As mentioned previously, part of the unpredictability of a summer on *Nivonim* staff is the other staff members with whom the *Rosh Nivonim* works. All of the respondents who had worked either as a counselor for *Nivonim* or as a *Rosh Nivonim* mentioned the particularity of the staff who tend to work with *Nivonim.* Within this Camp Ramah, one cannot be a counselor for *Nivonim* until s/he is the age of a 3rd year staff member. Thus, a majority of the *Nivonim* staff members are 3rd or 4th year staff members. This is a significantly different reality than the other *Aidot* who are mostly comprised of 1st and 2nd year staff members. With any unit the *Rosh Aidah* manages a staff and works to empower and continuously train the counselors to improve and be strong educators, care-takers, and role-models. However, the majority of staff at camp are either first year or second year counselors who are eager to learn new roles of mentoring first year counselors. With *Nivonim*, the counselors have been senior counselors for at least two previous

years. The senior counselor is the one who demonstrates the skills and expectations to the other younger staff. Typically by the end of the summer, the senior counselor feels much of the ownership over their cabin and is the staff member with the answer. This can be challenging when all of these previous senior counselors are then brought to work together; each is no longer considered *the* senior staff member in the group.

> *The hardest part of being Rosh [Nivonim] is that your staff is comprised of veteran staff members, who have been told that they are all-star counselors, when they may not have been so it is really hard to gain their respect and have them follow you and when they are convinced, that they are the best and shouldn't have to change their style, and that's why I think being Rosh [Nivonim] is different*

-Previous *Nivonim* Counselor

The *Rosh Aidah* can experience this as a sense of entitlement and an unwillingness or reluctance to take advice or "learn" how to be a *Nivonim* counselor. The staff members themselves often feel this as tension with other staff members and increased agitation at the different interpretations of what it means to be a good counselor for 16 year olds.

Thus, the task of *Rosh Nivonim* is less about training new counselors, and more focused on conflict resolution and maintaining a strong staff dynamic where everyone ultimately understands the importance of working for the good of the campers themselves. Additionally, due to the nature of the *Nivonim* program, including the isolation from the rest of camp, the immense anticipation brought by the youth and staff, as well as the drama of the manufactured moments throughout the summer, the staff tends to feel more invested in the *Nivonim Aidah*. This is helpful in terms of buy-in from staff members and willingness to fully commit to the kids and programming necessities. However, this can also cloud the judgement of staff, including the *Rosh Aidah*, as it is hard to know when one is too invested or cannot separate commitment to the kids from 16 year old drama.

A Constant Balancing Act

All respondents who had worked with or alongside a *Nivonim* type program discussed the many challenges that arose from this experience. Unsurprisingly, the challenges were essentially a series of balancing acts. One respondent constructively critiqued Camp Ramah in Wisconsin as having a "high net and a low ceiling" when it came to programming and creativity. There was an understanding that the experience of each summer would be amazing, and expectations and resources are high, yet the real potential for thinking outside of the box and starting from fresh was limited for the staff.

Schedule

The changes in schedule create a very different structure for both the campers and the staff in *Nivonim* to adjust to and live by. Not only is the schedule different from the normal structure of other summers at camp, the "typical" day also changes often within the *Nivonim* program, thus challenging staff and campers to develop a routine and transition into their summer-long experience. Several of the respondents who spoke about their experience working as counselors for *Nivonim* indicated how challenging it was for them to adjust and acclimate to the "craziness" of the schedule. For those respondents who liked structure and order, it was a continuous struggle to create order out of the constant chaos. These respondents spoke about their desire for a clearer understanding of past structures and schedules. Some of these respondents were previous *Rashei Nivonim* and pushed for the *Rosh Nivonim* to spend significant energy before the summer understanding the logistical differences in their job. This will be crucial, they feel, in the *Rosh Nivonim's* ability to lay out for their counselors weekly and hopefully daily schedules. These respondents said that this was really the only way one could prepare for the task of working with *Nivonim.*

While the schedule change creates disorder for many, it is also a key piece of the excitement of the *Nivonim* program. All of the respondents spoke about how hard it would be for the kids and most of the staff to succeed at camp, after being there for so many years if the schedule and general structure of the program is not significantly distinct from the rest of camp. Many respondents felt the tension between appreciating the change that the *Nivonim* summer brings and struggling with the constantly moving parts and unique nature of each day and each week.

Logistics
This schedule along with the complexity of the programs create a logistical challenge. Several of the respondents who had been counselors in *Nivonim* spoke about the increased complexity in communication that stemmed from the complexity and fluidity of the program schedule. Almost all respondents described a program or situation during the summer when counselors were not aware of what was going on, or only one counselor showed up to a program that they had not even planned. The clear sentiment from the respondents was that while these issues definitely do exist in any *Aidah* at camp, they are magnified and require increased attention when working within the *Nivonim* program.

Intensity
Many respondents noted that while the balancing acts exist in other programs and areas of camp, there was a different feel or intensity when it came to the *Nivonim* program. Almost all respondents brought up trying to find the balance between creating new programs and implementing programs that were successful in the past. Since most counselors for *Nivonim* recall their *Nivonim* camper summer with deep emotion, they bring passion and high expectations with them. It is challenging for people at camp to imagine a *Nivonim* experience

that is different from how they remember their final year as campers. Several respondents

brought up the effect of nostalgia in the experience of all involved, and the effect of

subconscious nostalgia that they sometimes did not even recognize until it was too late.

Lack of Programmatic Clarity

Throughout the conversations, it became overwhelmingly clear that there is a lack of

understanding as to what the *Nivonim* program actually is. A seemingly simple question, - what

exactly is the *Nivonim* program, is a very contentious topic. In order to determine what role the

Rosh Nivonim must play in running the program, the program's core elements must be clear. As

with many programs in which people are invested and committed, there are several different

understandings of the current program, as well as various aspirations for the future of the

program. When all research participants were given an open-ended question as to the key

components of the *Nivonim* program, the main responses were:

- Leadership/Responsibility
- Capstone to the Camper Experience
- Focus on Israel education and encouraging participation on Ramah Israel Seminar (a summer program for those entering 11th grade)
- Having elements of choice as part of an effort to provide intentionally distinctive programs

Many of the respondents who had been *Rashei Aidah* felt an increased pressure to make each

summer distinct, particularly since some campers could have been attending Camp Ramah in

Wisconsin from the age of 8, resulting in 9 summers in camp by the time they reach *Nivonim.*

For this reason, a real leadership program was encouraged by many respondents both to develop

the potential in 16 year olds, as well as to help them understanding more about what happens

behind the scenes throughout camp. Additionally, due to the flexibility of the *Nivonim* schedule,

there is great potential for the campers to take increased leadership roles in their own summer. Several of the previous *Rashei Nivonim* stressed the potential and significance for *Nivonim* campers to have opportunities to program for themselves, both as an educational tool as well as a way to create new opportunities for them during their final summer as campers.

Fewer people, yet still a significant number of respondents, stressed the potential for the *Nivonim* summer to be a capstone experience that would allow for the campers to reach higher understandings of how camp operates, to live by slightly different rules and expectations as the oldest campers, and to have more complex educational components of the program. Interestingly enough, several of the respondents who had only been *Madrichim L'Nivonim* described how counselors understandings of their roles as "what does it mean to be a Counselor for Nivonim?" differed. One even commented on how it was not until well into the summer that the staff and the *Rosh Nivonim* actually realized just how distinct this understanding was and how it affected various aspects of the program. Whether it was allowing campers to be awake and outside late into the night, or it was about "covering the cabins", there were clear differences of opinion. One respondent said:

> *creating special experiences and memories both as a capstone to the camp*
> *experience and as part of the ending that is both inwardly important to the*
> *individuals in the Aidah as a capstone to their camp experience, but [also*
> *leaves] camp on a positive note that will hopefully end with Israel [Ramah*
> *Seminar] and camp [returning as staff]*
> 										- previous *Rosh Nivonim*

Respondents explained that this capstone experience is important because of the epic amounts of fun that the campers experience, as well as to contextualize their experiences as campers and help them transition and internalize that their camper years are ending. As the youth grow into their late teens, their roles at both camp, school, and often within the family are shifting. Another

respondent who stressed the importance of the contextualizing potential of the *Nivonim* summer

stated:

> *[Creating a] capstone to their experience as campers…by*
> *contextualizing camp as an institution and transitioning them mentally*
> *out of being a participant and into being a product of camp*
> - Previous *Nivonim* counselor

To further display the ambiguity within the *Nivonim* program, there was significant

contrast on the role of Israel education and encouraging Ramah Seminar attendance. The director

and some previous *Rashei Nivonim* noted that a significant push within the *Nivonim* program is

to encourage and endorse Ramah Israel Seminar (other counselors would encourage the kids to

come back to camp for the subsequent summer). Additionally, these visionaries placed particular

attention on the role that *Nivonim* programming should have on higher level Israel conversations,

even beginning to think about the role as American Jews within the global Israel/Palestine

conversation. This is contrasted by many of the counselors and some other *Rashei Aidah* who did

not mention Israel or Ramah Israel Seminar as a key programmatic element. A couple

respondents within that category mentioned that there is actually little distinction because each

summer educational components should focus on Israel education. This highlights how a key

component to some was not even mentioned by others who have worked on the program in

different capacities.

A final demonstration of this haziness of the *Nivonim* program is the importance placed

on the CIT program. To a few (mainly counselors and *Rashei Aidah* who have not worked as a

Rosh Nivonim), the CIT program as leadership training was a crucial to the program. However,

some previous *Rashei Nivonim* and the director of the camp discussed how the CIT program is

not actually leadership nor staff training in the way that it appears. A previous *Rosh Nivonim*

believes that the program does not actually prepare campers to be on staff, and another believes that we should either do a more intense CIT program or not do it at all, as "the way we did it was wishy washy and half-baked….we should either scrap the program completely or use the time to make it better". Even the camp director agrees that the CIT program is not real staff training, although he links other aspects of the program to preparing participants for camp leadership (such as the intellectual, educational, and ownership). Many respondents discussed how the CIT program takes on different manifestations and focuses each year, while seemingly having little change in actual implementation options. This is a clear example of a programmatic element that shifts based on who is running the program, which prevents the program from improving through building on previous experiences and best practices.

While some individual respondents answered with utmost confidence in what the "*Nivonim* program is," it is clear from the range of topics and elements discussed that there is a need to clarify the program's core elements and their objectives in order to improve the effectiveness of these elements. Furthermore, several conversations discussed ways to shift the program to make it simpler or perhaps more effectively transferable and successfully implemented yearly. These findings are in the appendix and can be helpful once the camp has determined what the core elements and goals of the program should be.

Torah She'Bichtav- Written Torah

Through conversations with people from different camping movements, several key practices to transfer institutional memory emerged:

- Written "How-To" reports
- Focus on Logistics

- The "Bible" Method (explained below)

- Reflections from the end of previous summers

- Written narratives or in person conversations prepared by a consultant or someone who previously worked in the program

Every respondent who participated in this project discussed a system at their camp in which elements are written down and passed on in written form. In particular, the *Rashei Nivonim* (or equivalent) and camp directors were able to clearly explain the documentation systems that worked best for them.

Most of the respondents who spoke within the National Ramah Camping system discussed reports similar to the "How-To" reports or the *duchot* that are currently in place at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. These are overview reports, which might serve both the wrap up reflective purposes and evaluative opportunities for exiting staff, and also jumpstart the orientation for the incoming *Rosh Nivonim.* One of the respondents, who had previously been an equivalent to *Rosh Nivonim* at another Ramah Camp and had then moved into the leadership of the camp, discussed a system that takes this one step further. Building on the report *(duchot)* system that currently exists at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, this camp provides a binder for the incoming *Rosh Aidah,* which includes the previous ten years for the *Aidah* and the previous summer for those kids in particular. This is a prime way of demonstrating what it means to have written institutional memory of the program, as the adaptations and importance of the overall narrative is woven throughout the 10 years of documentation.

One respondent from Camp Hertzl spoke about their "Bible" system developed for the Ozrim program in 2000. The "Bible" is a day by day description of the summer. It includes weekly theme descriptions, various program sessions, days off schedules, logistical calendars

etc. Each year, the next unit head, colloquially known at Camp Hertzl as Mama and Papa Ozo, receives the "Bible" from the year before, along with access to each previously written Bible. While to some this can be tedious, Cohen explained that this "Bible" can also "help jumpstart someone's thinking and help wrap their mind around what they are doing." This notion of "jumpstarting" one's understanding was also acknowledged by previous *Rashei Aidah* who complimented small pre-summer writing assignments for their helpfulness.

Torah She'bealpeh- Oral Torah

Other key elements of transferring institutional memory emerged involves spoken commentary and conversations:

- Conversations
    - with the Director or Assistant Director
    - with participants and staff members who have participated or worked with the program in the past
    - with previous unit heads of the program
- Written narratives or in person conversations prepared by a consultant or someone who previously worked in the program
- In-person retreats

These methods were brought up in passing by some camping professionals, and as transformative and integral components of the experience for others. Some used this method to supplement the written material that they were given, to answer some lingering questions or prepare to problem solve. For others, having discussions with people whom they admire who had had this position in the past was critical as it allowed them to hear that individual's perspective on a situation that they may have experienced as a camper or staff member.

Several conversations noted the potential for in-person or at least virtual meetings prior to the start of the summer. The National Ramah Camping Movement, Camp Hertzl, and the Habonim Dror North America movement conduct several staff retreats during the winter and spring. From the conversations, it seems that this provides an invaluable opportunity for people who are either doing similar jobs in different sites or who will be working together in leadership roles to orient each other and ensure that everyone is on the same page. In terms of training, respondents noted that it is beneficial to beginning the work prior to arriving at camp. The opportunity to provide this training in person, rather than only through documents or several phone or email conversations, seems to be invaluable. Others built onto this model and spoke of the power of having in person meetings, recommending retreats with the staff for *Nivonim* in the spring prior to the summer as a way to jumpstart the pre-summer work and begin building the necessary working dynamics to have a successful summer.

Additionally, those who attended the national Winer *Rosh Aidah* Training Institute reported that it was an extremely important four day retreat to help them "think" as a *Rosh Aidah* and to collaborate with others who have done the job before or are learning the job for the first time. Furthermore, there were several respondents who described their different experiences preparing for several summers as a *Rosh Aidah*. There was a consensus that summers when there is more pre-summer interaction, usually in the form of conference calls or video sessions are more beneficial to prepare for the experience. One respondent stated, "we started conference calls in March or April, and that was really helpful, because from earlier on I understood what it meant to be on *Hanhalah* as a team." Understanding how dynamics will work as a team as well as participating in the selection of themes and topics with the administration of the camp were

reported to be extremely influential for a first time *Rosh Aidah* to understand their many different roles throughout the summer.

Several key respondents spoke of the importance of having a person at camp over many summers who can be the "one with the knowledge." This person will be the one with the institutional memory of the previous few summers, who will be able to help the *Rosh Nivonim* transition into the program and understand how their summer picks up where others have left off. Among those who spoke about such a person or coach, it seemed as though the key to ensuring this long-term progress was actually possible. Several suggestions of specific people at camp were made, both of particular individuals who would like to be that person but cannot and of people who were recommended to take on that role. Connected with ensuring the continuity and flow of the program, many respondents stressed the importance of working pre-summer as a way to develop staff dynamics and build a cohesive team, set the tone from the start, and alleviate some of the pressures at the beginning of the summer when it comes to logistics, and program planning. A suggestion was even made to have the campers do pre-summer work either in personalizing their experience, or in setting expectations and developing understanding of the program. This might help increase camper participation, ownership, and leadership.

Recommendations

After careful consideration, review of existing research, a plethora of conversations, and increased awareness and understanding of the many challenges and avenues of transmitting the institutional knowledge of the *Nivonim* program, several key conclusions became clear. Based on the literature regarding institutional memory, both Carley and Fincher explained how organizations required systems in order to learn from past experiences and maintain knowledge

outside the realm of specific individuals. One key challenge with the *Nivonim* program is that currently the passing on of the *Nivonim* program is not "institutional memory", but rather the "individual memory" of the previous *Rosh Nivonim*. Each *Rosh Aidah* brings not only their management style, personal passions, and relationships to the group, they also bring their own interpretations and perceptions about *Nivonim* itself and how best to lead the program. This creates a clash of understanding each summer as the next unit head, the next set of staff members, and the next group of campers tries to address the tensions between what they are experiencing, their expectations, and their perceptions of what people experienced in the past. As the literature demonstrated, the perceptions of previous experiences and the context in which the employee enters should not be undervalued.

While some element of perception and expectations is inherent in this traditionally driven camp model, much could be mitigated if elements of the program were better defined. The challenge does not lie solely in how time is spent, but also in different understandings of the ultimate goals of the program and the larger trajectory of the *Nivonim* program (including past, present, and future). Just as the ETI: Toolkit encouraged constant reflection on how an organization was executing its vision, particularly during transitions, the *Nivonim* program needs some strategic planning and a clearer vision, so that there is a consistent context within which a *Rosh Aidah*, the kids and staff of that summer, and the summer before and the summer after, can exist. This will also allow for stronger analysis of whether the implemented program is aligned with the vision.

In addition to clarifying the broader vision and creating a more communal institutional memory that can be shared, a more effective and fluid system of passing on the program is necessary. Camp Ramah in Wisconsin has a fairly advanced and institutionalized system to pass

on the "how-to" for the running of each program and component. This system includes written

documentation as well as in depth conversations with the director. Nevertheless, according to the

individuals interviewed in this research, it is not adequate for the *Nivonim* program.

Of the camps that also had concrete methods, several are worthy of further consideration.

- **The "Bible" Method**- This method allows for more detailed understanding of the flow of

  each day and the thought process and reactions of those involved. In many ways this

  combines the Camp Ramah in Wisconsin *Mercaz* system of evaluating and documenting

  programs with the *doch* completed by the *Rashei Aidah*. This has the potential to be

  incredibly influential particularly as many *Nivonim* programs have not been documented

  using the *Mercaz*[4] system. However, this system could discourage creativity and novelty as

  it would increase the ease at which previous programs are found.

- **The Binder System**- This system would be a slight variation from the current system.

  Instead of only receiving two *duchot* each year (that of the *Aidah* the previous summer

  along with that of the particular group of kids from the summer before), the incumbent

  Rosh Aidah receives a binder with the *duchot* for the previous ten years of the *Aidah*

  program as well as the previous *doch* about that particular group of kids. The *Nivonim Rosh*

  Aidah would receive all of the *duchot* written about that particular group of kids instead of

  only the most recent. While this can be lengthy, as each report varies from 20-100 pages, it

  can provide a clear overview of any changes as well as the overall trajectory of the program

  over the past 10 years. This is beneficial as it builds the pictures for the *Rosh Aidah* of the

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[4] The *Mercaz* refers to a building in camp where the educational, and programmatic elements of camp are planned. Programs are stored electronically, both in the planning and evaluating stages.

recent history and the trials and triumphs of her/his predecessors. This is helpful in the

broader narrative telling and foundation building. However, as a physical binder it is an

incredible waste of paper and resources, and thus some modifications are needed.

- **In Person Retreat**- This method was suggested as a critical part in narrative telling. It can

  provide the time to work through logistical or programming material as well as generate

  questions and concerns before arriving at camp. This can help alleviate the continual storm

  of tasks and moving parts that ensues when arriving at camp along with the perennial lack

  of time to accomplish everything. Additionally, this topic was raised in some conversations

  with the suggestion to provide an in-person retreat for the staff of the *Nivonim* program.

  This will help jump start their work before the summer, a crucial element for building

  commitment to the program as well as alleviating the sheer quantity of work required to

  before campers arrive. The obvious challenges with this are cost, scheduling and logistics.

  However, it is definitely something to aspire to or at least determine the feasibility.

- **Narrative and Guidance Program**- This system was suggested as a key element in

  ensuring the success of the written methods of record keeping. This could mean creating a

  data base of previous *Rashei Nivonim* who would be willing to speak with the incumbent

  Rosh Nivonim about their experiences, etc. This is helpful and currently happens

  informally. A more intentional, planned process could enhance its effectiveness.

- **Google Doc**- This system is perhaps a slight variation and even combination of the "Bible"

  method and the binder. It is a massive Google drive within which each *Rosh Nivonim* has a

  folder where they save all of their work. This includes the process by which they prepared

  for the summer, began working with the staff, acclimated the campers to the program, dealt

with assigning *Nivonim* honors, etc. This would be available to the next *Rosh Nivonim* so

that as they come upon questions during the course of the summer, in addition to using the

human resources in camp, they can also work with these online accounts, hand outs and

documents. While at times an overload of resources can be detrimental, the hope is that this

is organized well enough and the chaos is hidden in various folders that should someone

want to use it only to store their own work, they could do that without constant distraction.

- **Key Holder or Mentor of the Institutional Memory for the *Nivonim* Program**- This

  model will essentially assign one person, who has the knowledge, the passion, and the time

  to provide assistance to the *Rosh Nivonim* and the staff of the program during the summer

  and prior to the start of the summer. This person would need to be committed to camp for

  several years in the foreseeable future and be a part of the strategic planning and vision

  building of the program. They would provide a new advisory support the *Rosh Aidah*.

As is clear by this list, there are various options to strengthen a camp's capacity to

transfer institutional memory to new leadership for the oldest campers in the leadership program,

and a combination of several options is ideal. However, it is important to understand why a

combination is best. There is not one method to prepare the new *Rosh Aidah* for *Nivonim* that

will work for all new *Rashei Aidah*, and each person will interpret an other's narrative, thought

process, and documents in her/his own way. This is the reason that a strategic planning and

vision process is so crucial for the *Nivonim* program. And, the time might be right to make this

happen. A new *Rosh Nivonim* must understand how the program currently stands, including the

logistics, the purpose, goals, and the summer long trajectories. Once the foundation is clear, the

new *Rosh Nivonim* should know the aspects of the program that they can tweak or focus on

should s/he choose to do so, as well as the aspects of the program that have recently been shifted or established. Knowing where the program is on the trajectory of the short term and long-term goals and vision are necessary to allow the *Rosh Nivonim* to conduct their work effectively. It would require at least a couple years of consistency to determine the success of individual methods that are attempted.

Maintaining the element of creativity and originality on the part of the *Nivonim* staff is crucial for the ownership and ultimate success of the *Rosh Nivonim* and the program itself. However, setting her/him up to successfully choose their course of actions based on educated understanding of the context is equally important. This balance is incredibly delicate and of crucial importance. As leadership and empowerment of the staff are essential to the vision and values of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, the strategic plan as is conveyed to the *Rosh Nivonim*, and ideally to the *Tzevet Nivonim*, should demonstrate this constant give-and-take relationship between individual and programmatic flexibility, and structure for ongoing progress.

Part of the challenge, as stated previously, are the staff dynamics. Thus, spending some time looking into different methods to assist in the management of staff interactions could be beneficial. The preparation can include considering the challenges a particular staff might face and encouraging the *Rosh Aidah* to think critically about different communication methods s/he might want to implement throughout the summer. Additionally, in an attempt to process the *Nivonim* baggage that the staff members might be bringing into the summer, or providing some ideas for pre-summer processing of each other's biases and subconscious perceptions might help jumpstart the summer on a positive note.

Based on the recommendations presented here, it is most likely that the outcome of this research will be a more codified system of pre-summer, summer and post-summer work with the

Nivonim program. While this can be essential to the success of the program, caution is also issued to ensure that the program does not grow stale and stagnant. Finding ways to balance the flexibility of the *Nivonim* program with greater structure to the program will allow a clearer vision to guide the program along with creativity and leadership development of both staff and campers. Some critique systems of greater structure as they provide more opportunity for staff to copy from rather than innovate a new program or system. Thus, spending some time reflecting on how to avoid this possibility is important regardless of the direction chosen.

Next steps:
1. Further analysis of the research findings by the camp leadership and subsequent determination of which recommendations are possible. – Please see Appendix B for further analysis of the *Nivonim* program and potential modifications to enhance both the program and the turnover process.
2. Strengthen the vision of the program and implement a strategic planning process.
3. An in-depth conversation between the incumbent *Rosh Nivonim*, the *Nivonim* Mentor (should a person be designated) and the leadership of the camp.
4. An implementation plan for this spring and summer as well as the next few summers with regard to shifting the system.
5. Conversations with several thoughtful professionals identified through this research. (Names will be given directly to the Director of the camp.)
6. Additional research based on areas the camp director identifies.

Conclusion

It has become clear throughout this research experience that given the high turnover in the camp staff, institutional memory and a clear programmatic vision are essential to a program's success. The literary research further demonstrates how important an employee's understanding of their role and expectations is to meet the desired benchmarks. The most common comment upon beginning the conversations with respondents for this research was that many different camps and institutions are asking this question. This validated two of my hunches: that transitioning midlevel leadership in summer camps does not have an easy solution, and that the concern is a common challenge that summer camps are facing.

The important piece to recognize as a result of these conversations is that there is not a one size fits all system for transmission of strong institutional memory or to pass on leadership in programs such as the *Nivonim*. There is no process or method that each camp can introduce that will work universally for each incumbent *Rosh Aidah*. At the same time, it is necessary to increase the chances that an individual will adjust and transition to the new role with as few bumps as possible. This can be achieved by implementing a system that includes a variety of mechanisms, written reports, and face to face contact in order to meet various needs and learning styles of different individuals, so that they gain the needed information and skills and feel supported by the institution, the camp leadership, and the structures that are in place.

While there are aspects of the program itself that can be adapted and structured differently in order to transition more easily, the research did not reveal any consensus. Thus, the respondents' thoughts and descriptions detailed in the findings section can provide additional insights and methods for the leader of camp who is the primary visionary for the program. Nevertheless, it does seem critical to provide some additional structure to the program. This structure can take place in the form of programmatic and schedule structure or through a stronger directional focus and vision for the program.

Thus when summer camps are planning for their next summer, it would benefit them to spend some time thinking about their transitional processes and how much they rely on the individual vs. provide structural support systems from within the organization. The influx of new ideas, energetic youth workers, and engaged experiential educators is what leads to the success of summer camps. It is the responsibility of the leadership of the camp to ensure that these individuals are able to succeed to the best of their abilities and attempt to limit barriers of transition that might inherently exist.

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Appendix

    Depending on the interviewees' roles, the questions were modified in several categories in

order to gain greater insights. Additionally, as conversations were informal, the discussions

occasionally led through these questions without the researcher intentionally stating them.

Questions for Interviewees:

1. What is your current position at your institution OR what was your most recent position?
2. How does your institution (or particular programs if there are several) pass on institutional memory? Please describe the system.
   a. Is this method effective? Do you feel this method prepared you or individuals that have worked in your institutions adequately for their roles?
3. Based on your own experience, how would you suggest passing on the knowledge of your program/institution?
4. **For Previous *Rosh Nivonim* (equivalents):**
   a. In what ways is the *Nivonim* program distinct from the other *Aidah/Aidot* that you worked on?
      i. How did you learn/ understand these differences?
   b. How did you prepare for your job as *Rosh Nivonim*? How did it differ from your preparation in other summers/for other roles? Did you feel sufficiently prepared?
   c. What would you say were the most important information/themes/categories for you to understand pre-summer?
   d. What do you wish you knew before beginning your work as *Rosh Nivonim*?
   e. How did you document what you learned over your summer as *Rosh Nivonim* to pass on to future *Rashei Aidah*?
   f. Is there a more effective way to pass on this information to the next *Rosh Nivonim*?
   g. What information would you want to pass on to future *Rashei Nivonim*?
   h. How might you suggest adapting the *Nivonim* program (or the control over it) to make it more transferable between *Rashei Aidah*?
5. **For People in Director Roles (of camps):**
   a. What would you say are the key aspects of the *Nivonim* (equivalent) program?
   b. What do you think *Rosh Nivonim* (equivalent) needs to know before the summer?
   c. What do you think the balance should be between preparing future *Rashei Aidah* uniformly (for the sake of program continuity) and encouraging each person to bring fresh eyes to the position?
   d. Do you feel as though they are normally prepared? How do you see them become prepared?
   e. Are there any common areas of struggle for *Rosh Nivonim* versus other first time *Rashei Aidah*? Explain please.

      f.   What ideas might you have to prepare these people even more?
           i.   How might you adapt the program?
          ii.   Do you have a long-term vision for significant changes in this program that could affect passing it from one Rosh to the next?

6. **For previous *Rosh Aidah* (any BUT Nivonim):**
      a.   How did you prepare for being a *Rosh Aidah*?
           i.   What structures were in place to help you get ready for the summer?
          ii.   Did you feel prepared enough when the summer started?
      b.   What are the most important programmatic aspects of the *Aidah* that you worked with?
      c.   What do you think are the key aspects of the *Nivonim* program?
      d.   Do you see differences in the *Nivonim* program and the *Aidah* that you worked with?
           i.   (Note if the *Rosh* was a *Nivonim* counselor in the past or not, and when.)
      e.   Imagine yourself as *Rosh Nivonim*, what would you do to prepare for the new role?
      f.   What have you observed are some of the challenges for *Rashei Nivonim* from watching other *Rashei Nivonim*?

7. **For previous *Tzevet Nivonim* (both *Chevratii* and *Miktzoi*):**
      a.   What do you think are the key aspects/goals of the *Nivonim* program?
      b.   In what ways was being a *Madrich/a* for *Nivonim* different from other *Aidot* with whom you have worked?
           i.   How would you describe the differences in the programs?
          ii.   What was the biggest adjustment for you as a *Madrich/a*?
      c.   Are there any changes in the program (or preparing for the summer) that you think would have eased that transition?
      d.   ***Additional questions for *Madrichim* who were on *Tzevet Nivonim* more than once**
           i.   Did your training differ from summer to summer?
          ii.   What elements of staff week/staff training were most helpful in your understanding of the *Nivonim* program?
         iii.   What role does/should the *Rosh Aidah* play in preparing you for working with *Nivonim*?
         iv.   How can a *Rosh Nivonim* best support the *madrichim*?

Appendix B: Areas for Improvement

There are many areas within the *Nivonim* program and structure where respondents described room for improvement. It is important to remember that the focus of my research conversations was not on ways that the *Nivonim* program should be changed, but rather was placed within the broader structure of how to enhance the effectiveness and transmission of the program itself. Nevertheless, suggestions and critiques to the current processes and programs emerged throughout various conversations. The two main areas of the program that were discussed repeatedly were the *Chevrutah* program and the CIT program.

Chevrutah

The *Chevrutah* program (program of Jewish learning) as it pertains to the *Nivonim* program has taken many forms over the past 20 years. While the complex history might not be as pertinent here, there are two reasons why this seems to be a relevant aspect of the *Nivonim* program to discuss in the context of this research. First, as many of the respondents mentioned, the *Nivonim* program is meant to have a higher level of educational experience in order to push the 16 year old campers in a way that builds on and extends their previous summers at camp. Additionally, there was a strong feeling that both the *Nivonim* staff and the campers could handle and would excel at the opportunity to learn intensely in informal ways about a topic of their choosing. Secondly, the *Chevrutah* program was a way to take advantage of the additional time available during the day for these *Nivonim* campers. Originally, the campers had their Jewish studies class with Jewish text teachers, similar to all other *Aidot* in the camp, in addition to their *Chevrutah* intensive studies. Thus, this was a method to provide a different type of equally intensive Jewish learning, and perhaps even model studying with their peers as they continue on their Jewish journeys and begin to think about their college experiences.

As time went on changes were instituted, beginning with eliminating the typical Jewish text classes for the *Nivonim* program. Several respondents, who have observed the shifts that the *Nivonim* program has taken, described many years when staff members created their own curricula to teach to campers who would choose a topic they were interested in exploring. Based on responses from people who worked with the program during these years, it seems that a "successful" *Chevrutah* summer consisted of classes meeting 10 to 12 times a summer, with the programs somewhat planned out in advance of the summer. The challenge, as explained by these respondents, was that discussing something 10 times during the summer did not fill the need for intensive Jewish learning, nor were the topics always complex enough to be considered intensive informal educational experiences. There was a feeling that the solution had not been found yet.

In 2012, a shift was made in an effort to intensify the content. The new model continued having counselors teach campers, yet the counselors were given a set curricula for their sessions, which they were allowed to modify and personalize. From the respondents, both from counselors, the *Rosh Nivonim* as well as other members of the leadership team that summer, it was not successful. The overwhelming feeling from the respondents was that the curricula was not exactly what the group was looking for, nor was there enough time for the counselors to wrestle with the material in a satisfactory way to create a meaningful program. While a couple of the counselors from that summer were relieved not to have to make their own curricula from scratch, none of those involved in this study remember the *Chevrutah* program playing any significant role in the course of that summer.

As a result of that summer, a speaker series was instituted in order to take better advantage of the various educators and scholars who visit Camp Ramah in Wisconsin throughout the summer. From the respondents involved in creating this shift, it was a way to raise the

academic conversations that the *Nivonimers* were having, as well as provide more structure to the program. Of the respondents involved there are mixed feelings on the success of this program. Several of them have fond memories of being with speakers and of engaged campers. Other respondents do not see this as a significant addition to the *Nivonim* program, because it is already a given within the current camp culture to incorporate scholars in residence. Others still feel as though the *Nivonim* campers bring a different sense of energy, and maybe importance, to these speakers, often frontal learning experiences, than they do to the discussion based, informal education that was present in previous manifestations of this program.

The conversations led to what might be more ideal for the program. One respondent claimed that the 2012 version of having an educator create a strong curriculum has the most potential, but it needs "better execution and stronger planning". Another respondent feels as though moving back to the more traditional model of counselor driven sessions is the "long-term move." Yet another respondent feels as though the real tension with "outsourcing," a term that several respondents used in this context, of the *chevrutah* curriculum is the level of control and responsibility of the *Rosh Nivonim* over the experience of the staff and the campers for that summer.

Counselor-in-Training (CIT) Program

Several respondents brought up the Counselor-in-Training program as a key element of the *Nivonim* program and experience, yet also as a significant weakness or untapped potential in the summer. One respondent stated that the camp had to either "make it a stronger program or cut it"; a sentiment that was repeated throughout many of the conversations by previous *Nivonim* counselors, *Rashei Nivonim* and other members of camp leadership. Many respondents noted that this program does not actually prepare the campers to be on staff in the way that perhaps people

view the intention of the program. There was a strong sentiment to have focused, planned training in the program, rather than simply increasing the time that is spent with the younger campers. The current camp director believes that the CIT program does not actually prepare the campers to be on staff, and while camper care is the most important element to being a staff member, it is not actually the most difficult aspect of being a staff member at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. He believes that other aspects of the program, including the intensive learning, contextual experiences, service projects, internship, are the elements areas where the 16 year olds grow and develop the skills they will need to become strong camp staff members.

The research exposed a real sentiment that the camp had to make a decision about the importance of the CIT program. A couple respondents expressed how the presence and role of the CIT program in the course of the summer are dependent on the *Rosh Nivonim* and what they believe is crucial for the experience. This can create a tension as some respondents discussed the challenge that creating real change and enhancing a program takes several summers. Changing the CIT program each summer based on the commitment and focus of the *Rosh Nivonim* is not viable without the buy-in of the overall camp leadership.

Additional research findings

Many other areas of the *Nivonim* program, structure, and philosophy were brought up throughout the conversations in this research project. Several respondents discussed the role of service projects within the *Nivonim* program. A couple pushed for more opportunities for service and "giving back" within camp-grounds and programs. Others suggested that more options be found for service projects for the *Nivonim* campers, other than the single opportunity that currently exists. Some people connect the service projects to the need for more *tzedakah* (righteous giving) within the camp structure and educational values of the camp community.

Others stressed the importance of enhancing the service projects as a staff training program, and an understanding of contextualizing the ending of their camper experience and beginning to conceptualize their future staff experience.

One general suggestion was to "strip down the program" and focus on a few areas as a way to enhance and specialize a few aspects. The feeling from these respondents was to create a stronger and more focused program so as to increase effectiveness and success. Others disagreed and suggested that the *Rosh Nivonim* needed to be thinking continually about how the campers could be doing more. "Idle hands do devil's work"- a phrase and sentiment brought up by several respondents reflecting on previous summers, particularly this past one.

Several key respondents spoke of the importance of having a person at camp over many summers who can be the "one with the knowledge." This person will be the one with the institutional memory of the previous few summers, who will be able to help the *Rosh Nivonim* transition into the program and understand how their summer picks up where others have left off. Among those who spoke about such a person or coach, it seemed as though the key to ensuring this long-term progress was actually possible. Several suggestions of specific people at camp were made, both of particular individuals who would like to be that person but cannot and of people who were recommended to take on that role. Connected with ensuring the continuity and flow of the program, many respondents stressed the importance of working pre-summer as a way to develop staff dynamics and build a cohesive team, set the tone from the start, and alleviate some of the pressures at the beginning of the summer when it comes to logistics, and program planning. A suggestion was even made to have the campers do pre-summer work either in personalizing their experience, or in setting expectations and developing understanding of the

program. This might help increase camper participation, ownership, and leadership. This suggestion was raised by several respondents.

There were many suggestions made regarding how to facilitate the flow of institutional memory and assist in the transition of new *Rashei Nivonim*. Several respondents suggested a mentorship program, referring to a semi-formal connection process of an incoming *Rosh Nivonim* with previous *Rashei Aidah*. Another respondent suggested a history or archive system of previous years, including many of the aspects that are included in the current *doch* structure, although more expansive and connected to several previous years. Others stressed including in the history, a "track-changes version" of the program, so that as ideas and suggestions are presented they can be evaluated based on the context and knowledge of past versions of the program. Several leadership team members from around the country responded feeling very strongly that the actual candidates who are chosen are the key to ensuring a successful program. Within this context, the respondents felt that the structure or system was less the key and would only really help support those that should be doing the job in the first place, "the system can only do so much."