

**INFORMING A BRANDING STRATEGY:  
A COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS FOR THE SCHOOL OF  
JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE**

Carly Talia Brown

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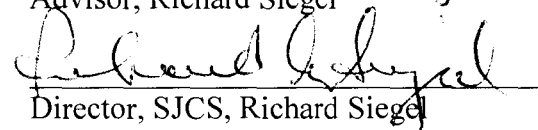
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION  
LOS ANGELES SCHOOL

SCHOOL OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

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SERVICE**

Approved By:

  
Advisor, Richard Siegel

  
Director, SJCS, Richard Siegel

## Table of Contents

Abstract	5
Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	8
What is Branding?	9
Methodology	11
Findings	15
Location	15
Name Change	19
Internships	23
Dual Degree/Partnership	27
Pre-attendance Contact	31
Other Findings	34
Cost	34
Faculty	37
Image	39
Reputation	41
Alumni	44
Sense of Community	46
Recommendations	49
Location	49
Name Change	50
Internships	50
Dual Degree/Partnership	52
Pre-attendance Contact	53
Cost	54
Image/Faculty	54
Reputation	55
Alumni	56
Sense of Community	56

Conclusion	58
References	59
Appendix A: Interview Guide for Students Attending Wagner, Hornstein and AJU	60
Appendix B: Interview Guide for Students Attending SJCS	62
Appendix C: Interview Guide for Alumni of SJCS	64
Appendix D: Interview Guide for Jewish Community Influencers	66
Appendix E: Interview Guide for Donors to SJCS	67

## **Abstract**

In 2008-2009, the School of Jewish Communal Service (SJCS), then celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary released a strategic plan, written by Director Richard Siegel, recommending that the school update its image for a more contemporary audience, in general, and for prospective students, in particular. This thesis undertakes a competitive analysis for SJCS, for the purposes of developing a branding strategy for the program, aimed at this group of prospective students to raise their awareness of and interest in attending the school.

In conducting the competitive analysis, three other graduate programs were identified as being similar to SJCS in that they provide training in Jewish professional leadership and offer opportunities for dual degree Masters degrees: American Jewish University, New York University's Wagner School of Public Service paired with the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, and Brandeis University's Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program paired with the Heller School for Social Policy and Management. Each of these programs was seen as a potential competitor to the SJCS-USC partnership, although in decidedly different ways, as the competitive analysis makes clear.

Findings from this study suggest that a branding strategy for SJCS should emphasize in particular the program's internship structure, sense of community, and dual degree partnership with USC, as these were all identified as significant strengths of the school, particularly in comparison with the other three programs. Additionally, in moving forward with a branding strategy indicated by the findings of this thesis, SJCS should look to improve its self-presentation through its written, verbal and online promotional materials in order to enhance its image. Finally, SJCS is approaching a critical branding opportunity with the imminent changing of its name to the School of Nonprofit Management. The school can

utilize this opportunity to its advantage to project a new image consistent with the substantive changes identified in its strategic plan.

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Thank you also to everyone who contributed to the body of research. Their time and insight is greatly appreciated and will surely help to make the School of Jewish Communal Service a better program for future Jewish professionals to come. I hope this thesis and its research helps to contribute to the betterment of the field of Jewish Communal Service; I know that I have greatly enjoyed the time I have spent conducting the research and developing the final report.

## Introduction

In 2007-2008, Richard Siegel, then the Interim Director of the School of Jewish Communal Service (herein referred to as SJCS) of Hebrew Union College (herein referred to as HUC), conducted a strategic plan for the program. One of the primary recommendations was to change the image of the program consistent with the changes in the nonprofit arena, in general, and the Jewish community, in particular. The image change would include renaming the school and designing a new branding strategy. In his recommendation, Richard Siegel noted that “a new branding strategy is of critical importance, particularly in relation to renaming the school and cultivating a new national image.” (Siegel 2008: 5) A major goal of the branding strategy was to reposition the school for a contemporary audience, including prospective students, supporters, the community of Jewish professionals and Jewish communal leadership in general, both locally and nationally.

The strategic plan was released in October 2008. In the spring/summer of 2009, HUC faced uncertain economic times, and some of its programs, including SJCS, were considered for potential closure. The HUC Board of Governors targeted SJCS for a variety of reasons, including the program’s cost and its non-denominational status, which some felt was inconsistent with HUC’s mission of serving the Reform movement. Throughout this period of uncertainty, as I reflected on the extensive contributions of the School of Jewish Communal Service to the national and international Jewish community, I found it hard to understand how its importance could be called into question. However, as I also thought about my own experiences growing up in Los Angeles, I realized that I was unaware of HUC or SJCS until I started researching graduate schools. This raised the question as to what the



branding and marketing strategy of HUC looked like, and how the SJCS program was identified within it.

After researching this question, I discovered that, while HUC did have a marketing department located in New York, there was little public presence in Los Angeles and no separate branding strategy for SJCS. Taking into consideration Richard Siegel's recommendations in the strategic plan and the recent events that had transpired in the College-Institute, I decided to focus my thesis on developing a branding strategy for SJCS, aimed at prospective students for the purpose of recruitment. At the same time, the school was celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary that year, which felt like an appropriate time to re-examine its public presentation and to upgrade and update the quality of its brand.

## **What is Branding?**

The process of creating a branding strategy varies depending on which branding specialist is being consulted, but the basic steps in creating a successful branding strategy are generally consistent. The first step is to determine the brand platform, which begins with determining the mission and vision of the brand. The mission and vision of the brand expresses what the organization would like to see accomplished by the image being created and what would happen if the dreams of the brand were realized. (Strauss 2009: Slide 25) The next step in the brand platform phase is positioning the brand or "the tactical blueprint that anchors the creative vision, to then create an identity." (Perry & Winsom 2003:23) Essentially, positioning the brand helps manage the formation and implementation of the image created by a brand. The final element of the branding platform phase is to establish the

personality and voice of the brand. This humanizes the brand and gives it a style and tone, which are necessary to create a way for the consumer or audience to relate to the product.

Once the brand platform has been determined, the next step in a branding strategy involves the brand architecture, which establishes the relationship between the products and services, so that they are easy to identify. Immediately following the brand architecture is the determination of a visual vocabulary; this includes the logo and the colors used to identify the design associated with the brand. The visual vocabulary is one of the most important parts of a branding strategy, as it is used to “penetrate all communication in and around the brand and organization.” (Liff-Grieff & Schwarz 2008: 1) These elements should be used in conjunction with all material related to the brand and must remain consistent in their widespread publication. In conjunction with the development of the logo and visual vocabulary is the formulation of the brand messaging, such as a tagline to use with the logo that “conveys both the brand and its product’s relevance.” (Straus 2009: Slide 45) The final element of a branding strategy is the brand extension; in conjunction with all of the other components, the brand extension works to incorporate the product into the everyday life of the consumer, informing them of its benefits and messages.

This thesis does not attempt to construct a branding strategy for SJCS; rather it focuses on the core research needed to inform the brand platform and brand positioning for the program: the competitive analysis. As recommended by branding specialist, Sasha Strauss, a competitive analysis would assess the strengths and weaknesses of SJCS and its competitors, in an attempt to identify both opportunities to exploit and threats to avoid or minimize. The research conducted for this thesis is intended to identify how SJCS is

currently perceived, how it needs to or wants to be perceived, and what it needs to get there, in terms of informing a branding strategy aimed at prospective students.

While this research was aimed at prospective students, other constituencies it could have focused on were donors, SJCS alumni and the Jewish community. Specifically, research could have been conducted to inform a branding strategy to strengthen and increase donor support, alumni involvement and buy-in from within the Jewish community. Although these groups also help to ensure the success of SJCS, I chose to focus on prospective students as they are the primary constituency for the school, and the school's strategic plan envisions a student body of "transformational leaders" in the Jewish community. While donors, alumni and the Jewish community were not the target group of the branding campaign, there is a high possibility that they will benefit from the findings of the research conducted and the consequent branding strategy of SJCS.

## **Methodology**

The first step in the competitive analysis was to identify graduate programs that were similar in nature to SJCS, in that they provided training in Jewish professional leadership and offer opportunities for dual degree Masters. Three other dual degree programs were identified as potential competitors to the SJCS-University of Southern California (herein referred to as USC) partnership and were thus used as the basis of comparison in conducting research on developing a branding strategy from the perspective of a potential student.

The first program, located in Los Angeles, California is American Jewish University (herein referred to as AJU), which offers a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Nonprofit Management through the Lieber School of Graduate Studies. In conjunction with

the MBA, students can earn a joint degree in a Master of Arts in Education from the Fingerhut School of Education (MAEd) or a Master of Arts in Jewish Communal Service (MAJCS). A major difference, however, is that although AJU is a Jewish institution and located in Los Angeles, their MBA is aimed at the general population and not specifically a Jewish student body.

The second program, located in New York City, is New York University's Wagner School of Public Service (herein referred to as Wagner) and the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies (herein referred to as Skirball), which offer a dual degree in Master of Public Administration in Nonprofit Management (MPA) and a Master of Arts in Judaic Studies (MA). The third program, located in Waltham, Massachusetts, is Brandeis University's Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program (herein referred to as Hornstein) and the Heller School for Social Policy and Management (herein referred to as Heller). This program offers several dual degree options, including a dual MBA–MA in Jewish Professional Leadership and a dual Master of Public Policy (MPP)-MA in Jewish Professional Leadership.

To assess what were the strong decision determinants for students when applying to graduate school, ten students were interviewed from the four graduate institutions, in regard to their decision making process. Students were selected for interviews based on where they applied to graduate school and what programs they ended up attending. Of the ten students interviewed, the graduate institutions and number of interviews at each were SJCS-USC (4), AJU-MBA (2), Wagner-Skirball (2) and Hornstein-Heller (2). Most interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes, and during that time students were asked to assess a number of variables pertaining to the process that had led them to choose the graduate institutions they

ultimately attended. The following variables were raised as possible factors in their application and decision making process:

- Cost and availability of scholarships
- Location
- Options for academic partnerships
- Faculty
- Reputation
- Image
- Contact with program faculty, students and administration prior to application and acceptance
- Visual and written presentation of the program

After completing the interviews with current students, additional interviews were conducted with alumni and donors of SJCS, as well as with influencers in the Jewish community, to determine how they felt that the SJCS program compared to the other graduate schools. For this part of the analysis, seven interviews were conducted; two with alumni of SJCS-USC program who currently work within the Jewish community, three with donors to the SJCS program, one influencer within the Jewish community who used to work for one of the other graduate programs, and one with a member of the admissions staff of HUC, who is also a SJCS-USC alum. These interviews also lasted roughly 30-45 minutes, during which time interview subjects were asked similar questions to the students, as well as how they became connected to SJCS and, if possible, whether they could compare the program to the other graduate institutions. (See appendix for a list of the interview questions)

In total, eighteen interviews were conducted, including the one mentioned above with branding expert Sasha Strauss. The interviews of respondents living in Los Angeles were conducted in person, while those living out of town were interviewed over the phone. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and later analyzed. The data collected provides a good basis for a competitive analysis of SJCS against AJU, Wagner and Hornstein, to determine in what ways and how these programs are competitors in the graduate school market for students seeking dual degree programs in preparation of professional careers in the Jewish community. This analysis would, in turn, help to inform a branding strategy directed at prospective students of SJCS. In addition, the research would provide insight into the best ways to proceed with the implementation of the branding strategy, once developed.

## **Findings**

### **Location**

One of the most distinctive findings was that location was very strong factor in determining where prospective students planned to apply and attend graduate school. In eight out of nine interviews conducted with current students of Jewish professional studies programs, location was identified as an important factor in the decision making process for a variety of reasons. While these four programs are similar in terms of degrees offered, the impact that location has on prospective students divides the playing field up in some interesting ways. When broken down further, location proved to be a factor in regard to proximity of family, familiarity, connection to community (both secular and Jewish), the benefits the surrounding city would provide them during their tenure, and their interest in and ability to find employment in that area after graduation.

In first examining the difference of location between SJCS, Hornstein, Wagner and AJU, it is necessary to break it down and look at it from an East Coast versus West Coast perspective. By categorizing the programs in this way, a natural distinction is formed between SJCS and AJU, on the one hand, as they are both located on the West Coast, and Hornstein and Wagner, on the other, as they are both located on the East Coast. Even further, SJCS and AJU are both located in the Los Angeles area, while Hornstein, which is located in Waltham, Massachusetts (outside of Boston) and Wagner, which is located in New York City, are both in the Northeast, although roughly 200 miles apart and in very different metropolitan areas.

In interviewing the students, a clear distinction was evident between those who wanted to reside on the West Coast and those wanted to reside on the East Coast. A student

currently attending SJCS commented that while she had looked at East Coast universities for undergraduate programs, her sentiment remained that “I don’t think I would have ever moved east, because I can’t see myself there.” Another student attending the SJCS program made a similar remark that while she had thought about applying to the Wagner program, she ultimately wanted to remain in California. The same perspective applies on the East Coast, where students found themselves happy with where they were currently living and were unprepared to uproot themselves for graduate school. A second year student in the Hornstein program, who prior to graduate school had been living in New York, remarked that “being on the East Coast was important” so that he could continue to be “close to New York, where my parents are and my sister and brother are and where my wife’s sister and brother are.”

For those opting for the East Coast, there was a further location factor, the difference between New York and Boston. Regardless of the opportunities each school presented, some students made their decision based on whether or not they wanted to live in a large city like New York or if they wanted to reside in a smaller community like Waltham, Massachusetts. A student attending the Hornstein program said that the location of the city in which the program was situated was a big deciding factor for him; “Another thing that I looked at... coming from New York City, I just wanted to move to another city. For me, for graduate school...I wanted to be on a campus college.” He continued to say, “Location really came into play; being in New York for two years just felt overwhelming. At the end of the day, that was one of the biggest factors, location.”

Even though most of the subjects interviewed voiced strong opinions against attending school in New York City, some had the opposite reaction. There were those who wanted to attend school in New York and chose the Wagner program over the Brandeis



program specifically because it was in New York. Some interviewees expressed this desire due to their interest in New York as a hub of Jewish life, while others felt that they wanted a change in environment. One such example is a second year student in the Wagner program who is originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Prior to attending graduate school, she had worked in Boston and “wasn’t so excited to go back there and really, really wanted to be in New York.” While her reasons extend beyond just her preference for a particular city, this factor did come into play when deciding where to attend graduate school.

In two interviews conducted with alumni from SJCS, both of whom graduated more than five years prior, location was also brought up as a factor in their application and decision making process. One alumna stated that while she was originally from Seattle, she had attended undergraduate school in California and had wanted to stay in the state to pursue her studies in the field, leaving her with the choices of AJU and SJCS. A second alumnus, who knows this population well, commented, “Generally people know what city they want to be in and then they justify why the school is the right place for them.” Additionally, he noted that while he has since moved out of California, at the time it fit his lifestyle and where he wanted to be living. From these personal accounts, it is evident that location has long been an important factor in deciding what graduate school to attend.

Another way that location was factored into the decision making process for students was in what benefits they felt the city where the school was located would have on their future careers. For this, New York and Los Angeles were equally attractive; both are large Jewish communities, ranking number one and two in the United States in terms of Jewish population, and both offer a wide array of Jewish communal organizations, professional opportunities and professional networks. For example, a student currently enrolled in the

Wagner program “wanted to be in the hub of the Jewish world and I thought if I was in New York City... every opportunity would be at my fingertips and I loved that.” A similar sentiment was expressed from students attending AJU and SJCS in Los Angeles. They felt that the way the programs were set up, in the heart of a vibrant Jewish community, they would gain access to prominent leaders, learn about the workings of the community in which they hoped to work one day, and begin to build their professional networks.

The one interviewee, who responded that location was not an important factor in her decision on where to attend graduate school, also acknowledged that her decision would have an effect on her life later on down the line. This particular subject is originally from San Francisco, California, but attended undergraduate school on the East Coast and worked in Boston after completing her studies. Due to this, she was more open to the idea of attending graduate school on either coast and applied to both SJCS and the Hornstein Program. While she commented in her interview that she would have been fine attending graduate school at either location and that her decision ultimately came down to other factors, she felt that “where you go is going to somewhat influence geographically where you work. I knew that by coming here, I was going to end up on the West Coast for a while.”

Most interviewees acknowledged that whether a program was located on the East or West Coast was a determining factor in whether they would or would not apply to the school. Others stressed that proximity to family, surrounding community or the host city of the school is what drew their interest to a program. Regardless of the reason, it is evident that location does play a strong influencing factor in the decision making process of those interested in applying and attending graduate school. As a result, while SJCS, AJU, Hornstein and Wagner may be academic competitors, it is also possible to group them on a

geographic basis, which could be beneficial in targeting a marketing population for the branding strategy of SJCS.

### **Name Change**

When research began for the purposes of gathering information to inform a branding strategy for SJCS, the program was still determining whether it would undergo a name change. While it has since been resolved that SJCS will change its name to the School of Jewish Nonprofit Management, the research process identified a number of questions and concerns to be taken into consideration when marketing and branding the new name. Based on interviews conducted, SJCS needs to pay particular attention to how it markets and brands its new name to potential Social Work students so that they do not feel alienated by the term “management.” In speaking with current SJCS students, who were also enrolled in the dual degree Social Work program at USC, many of them felt that the term “management” did not encompass the skills that they were aiming to obtain in their graduate program. Furthermore, SJCS must do more than just change the name of the program; it must also use the name change as a platform to project a different image for the school and to progress forward with substantive changes identified in its strategic plan. Finally, it is integral to SJCS’s success that during the renaming process, they include and inform the alumni, so that they are not alienated from the development process. Doing so will help to maintain cohesive alumni networks; this will ensure that there will not be pre- and post- name change alumni communities, from those who graduated before the name change and those who will that graduate after the program name has been changed.

In interviewing students who currently attend SJCS, there were mixed reactions to the idea of changing the program name. Generally, students in favor of the name change were dual degree students at USC earning an MPA, while those who were more tentative about it were dual Master students at USC in the School of Social Work. For example, a Social Work student said that while she thinks the name change would make the professional Jewish world take the program more seriously, she does not particularly like it, and she does not think she “would have done the program if it would have had that name.” This sentiment was further articulated by another SJCS dual degree student in the Social Work program who commented that she believes that the name “Communal Service” displays an understanding of the work being done in the trenches and projects “a model of empowerment from the bottom up, rather than management, which is more top down.”

On the other side of the argument are students earning a dual degree in Public Administration, who tended to favor the name change. Many of the students expressed that the name “Communal Service” is outdated and that changing the name would make it “easier to explain what we do” in relation to the coursework and training received in the program. To elaborate further, a second year dual degree student in the MPA program said: “Management is better connected to what we do, in relation to leadership, fundraising and strategic planning, and that I am going to graduate school to become a manager of a Jewish nonprofit.” A second MPA student reiterated this idea, explaining that including management in the title of the program “is adequate for what we do in the program,” more clearly describing the type of classes that are taught and the material that is being instilled in the students. Additionally, the student noted that the potential name change was beneficial to SJCS, as it reflects a current trend of Jewish nonprofit professionals who are moving away

from a focus on Social Work and moving towards the skill sets in nonprofit or professional development and management programs.

When speaking with a Wagner student about the name change, she believed that if the new name had been in place when she was applying, it would have made her consider the program more carefully. She was turned off by the use of “service” in the title of SJCS; she felt that it reminded her of “servitude” and made her think of “the Federation worker, but not so much the person who is going to run the institution.” Similarly, a community influencer commented: “If you are trying to create managers, CEO’s and Development Directors of organizations, then this [changing the name] is the way to go.” He further explained “the words themselves, [referring to the name SJCS] are seen as being a servant, or diminishing,” and that the new name would be great for the school if it was “truly indicative of a new focus” and not just a cosmetic change. A student at AJU felt that renaming the program would make it more comparable to her program (MBA in Nonprofit Management) and make her see it as more of a competitor. However, her classmate questioned what would make the program more management based. As part of the MBA program at AJU, they are required to take tax law, accounting, and marketing classes, which are not part of SJCS’s current curriculum. Nevertheless, the student did acknowledge that SJCS does have an advantage that AJU does not, in that it does not necessarily have to offer all of these types of courses due to its partnership with the professional schools at USC.

While for the most part people were in favor of the name change, to successfully market and brand the new name it will be important to consider the contrast in opinions of SJCS students in relation to their dual degree program, as it raises significant questions and concerns. There is a clear divide in support of the name change, between students pursuing

secondary degrees from USC in Social Work and those working towards degrees in Public Administration. Therefore, if the school wants to continue to attract Social Work students, it needs to consider how to interpret the brand of the School of Jewish Nonprofit Management to still embrace and appeal to students looking to obtain Social Work credentials. In an interview with a member of the admissions staff at HUC, she mentioned that while most Social Work students come in wanting to do direct service (clinical), they often do not end up pursuing that route, opting for the macro discipline of COPA (Community Organizing, Planning and Administration). However, it is important for SJCS to remember that there is that initial desire amongst its potential students, to pursue the clinical concentration, so it must use the name change to its advantage to promote the additional skills they will obtain within the program for the potential of “higher professional mobility.”

Another important aspect to consider in the renaming process is that SJCS cannot just expect to give the program a new name and do nothing else. It must be a sign of greater changes and other things to come. While this is evident internally, as seen with the strategic plan and the desire to undergo a branding strategy, it is important to keep the public informed of the steps being taken to modify and improve the program. In doing so, SJCS needs to ensure that it continually informs the Jewish communal leadership and donors of the changes that are taking place, and most importantly, it must target the alumni. A second year SJCS student touched upon the strength of the alumni network of the program and recognized that “the name change has a potential to cause a rift between the pre-and post-name change graduates.” It is important for SJCS to consider the continuity of the alumni network and to make sure that they remain informed, recognized and included throughout the renaming process.

## **Internships**

A feature that SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein have in common is that they all have some variation of an internship requirement to be fulfilled by their students. However, the experiences, accessibility and role the programs play in helping the students acquire these internships is quite different within each program. In the competitive analysis, there was a high level of satisfaction found in regards to student's experiences of SJCS's internship program, which was not always the case with the other programs at AJU, Wagner and Hornstein. Based on the interviews conducted, this satisfaction was attributed to a variety of factors, including SJCS's requirement that students intern for both years of graduate studies and that the internship is used as a supplement to enhance what is being taught in the classroom to help students develop their professional selves. Additionally, SJCS prides itself on the role that its administration plays in the internship process. They actively advocate on the students behalf, as well as use the internship as another learning opportunity, including having students take a practicum (reflection) course in conjunction with the fieldwork. Finally, students, members of the Los Angeles Jewish community and students in other academic programs, all recognize the SJCS internship structure for the quality of work its students perform and the level of excellence of the internship experience itself.

Unlike Hornstein and Wagner, SJCS requires students to intern during both their first and second years, regardless of previous work experience. As described by one of HUC's recruitment staff, potential students are often "really impressed with the internships we are able to offer and the level of professional development that affords." According to a second year student at Hornstein, this is not the case in his program, where "it is strongly advised not to do an internship your first year." Rather they require that students do an internship full

time over the summer between the first and second year or part time during the second year. A student who applied to SJCS and Hornstein, who ultimately chose SJCS, remarked that “doing two internships was huge, rather than doing one.” She felt that having the opportunity to “gain two years of work experience [in a zero-stakes environment], that you would otherwise be losing from being in school,” was extremely beneficial and put SJCS’s internship program and the school in higher standing in comparison to Hornstein. Being able to intern over two years rather than one allows SJCS students to test out different areas of interest at different Jewish organizations in the Los Angeles area. A former SJCS student, who is now a Jewish professional within the Los Angeles community and has had the opportunity to work with SJCS interns as a preceptor, noted that “there is a difference between second and first year interns; you can see the professional growth.”

The Wagner program has a very different situation where there is no requirement to intern, unless the student did not have at least two years of work experience prior to coming to the graduate program. In that case, the student must intern for roughly 80 hours in preparation for their second year project, a consulting job for a nonprofit organization. However, while it is not difficult for students to find an internship, because organizations often come to the program looking for student interns, the program staff does not help to partner students with organizations to fulfill the internship requirement. The director of a graduate fellowship program, who generally spoke highly of the Wagner program, commented that the “one issue I have with NYU [Wagner] is that there is not a mandatory internship.” In regards to SJCS, he said: “That is a real strength of SJCS. In fact, I think it is the most important part of the program. I think that SJCS is really good in making sure that everyone gets an appropriate placement and is equitable about it and takes it very seriously.”



AJU has the most similar internship structure to SJCS, in that students are required to intern during the course of their graduate work; however because AJU is an executive master program, it takes on a significantly different format. An AJU student explained that most of the students in the program work full time at a nonprofit while they are in school, so they end up working something out with the dean of the program, who oversees the internship process. Essentially, the requirement is that if they are working full time and enrolled in the MBA program at AJU, “you have to come up with a contract to show that you are working on a project above and beyond what you would normally be doing at work, for a total of 600 hours.” Another first year AJU student equated this difference to the fact that at “SJCS students are immersed in school and then comes the internship, but at AJU it is somewhat the opposite, where work comes first and the school is somewhat the secondary factor.” Essentially, at AJU, school is seen as a supplementary enhancement to their career, whereas at SJCS, students are using their internship programs to put into practice what they are learning in the classroom in an effort to enhance their academic and professional development.

When speaking with students at SJCS about the internship program, a common theme was how the faculty plays an advocacy role for them during the internship process. SJCS has a supplemental field practicum class that goes along with its internship program that students are required to take during their second year of placement. In addition to the practicum, students are visited twice a year by their field advisor, are required to submit reflection logs on their experiences and must adhere to strict guidelines of performance. Most importantly, students at SJCS commented that they feel like there is always someone to whom they can turn, as an advocate on their behalf in relation to the internship, as there is a designated the

faculty member whose position is dedicated to that role. A student attending AJU expressed that she does not feel like there is the same level of advocacy at her program. Currently this student is experiencing difficulty receiving payment from her internship. At AJU, the dean of the program is in charge of the internships, and while she has tried to resolve her issues with the dean, she “takes a very back seat approach, she seems to like the easy way, and says you are a FEREP (Federation Executive Recruitment and Education Program) scholarship recipient and you should take it up with the Federation.”

Within the Los Angeles Jewish community, the SJCS internship program is highly respected and acknowledged for the level of professionalism and the abilities that the student interns possess. In an interview with an influencer within the Jewish community, she recalled a time when she was visiting Jewish Family Services where there were three interns working, and “the student from SJCS was way above the others.” She believes this has to do with the fact that at SJCS they have “almost one-on-one training and the people at the college who are teaching are really superior, so they give a world view that other interns don’t get. SJCS also works to match the students well with their internship.” During an interview with a professional in the Los Angeles Jewish community who works with students from both SJCS and AJU, she said she notices the differences in interns from the two schools: “There is a higher caliber of professionalism in the students coming from SJCS; I think they have been prepped better. There are no courses like that at AJU.” A second year student recalled that during the time when she was deciding what school to attend, she spoke with someone who had attended AJU and they “emphasized how SJCS had a great internship program...where someone is advocating for you, there is a review process, evaluation etc. AJU did not.”

In comparing AJU, Hornstein and Wagner's internship program to SJCS, there are vast differences that set them apart. SJCS's program is the only one that has a formalized structure for its internship and offers supplemental classes, instruction and coursework in conjunction with hours worked. In addition to this structure, there is a high level of advocacy provided by the staff at SJCS. The staff work on the behalf of the students to ensure that their needs are being met, that they have someone to provide counseling when needed, and that the students are being protected and learning all that they can from their internship process. There is also a lot to be said for the SJCS internship program being two years rather than one, as it allows the students to test out different areas of interest and explore different Jewish organizations, as well as expand their network of contacts within the Jewish community. Finally, SJCS's internship program is recognized both locally and nationally for its excellent structure and the superior students it produces. As a member of the Jewish community noted, the internship program at SJCS is a "highlight of the program." This obviously has significant implications in regard to the new branding strategy.

### **Dual Degree/Partnership**

As described in the Introduction, SJCS, AJU, Hornstein and Wagner all provide students with options to obtain dual degrees from their programs. In analyzing this as one of the factors that potential students take into consideration when deciding where to apply and attend graduate school, it is necessary to look at both aspects of the dual degrees, the Judaic and the secular or professional. For some students the most important aspect of their graduate school education was where they would be receiving their secular/professional degree, and they viewed the Judaic degree as supplementary. However, for others the opposite was true.

Overall, most interviewees took into consideration a variety of elements regarding the dual degree partnerships including the reputation of the secular and Judaic institutions/departments, the academic rankings of the secular program, whether the school was a research or academic institution, and the variety of degree opportunities available.

While most of the students applying to these programs hope to work in the Jewish community after graduating, in an effort to keep their options open, they also choose to obtain a secular professional degree. In interviews with the students, their answers varied as to which was more important. A dual degree student at SJCS and USC said that she debated up until the last minute about where to go. Originally, she had wanted to get an MBA, making AJU a very attractive choice. However, she also valued the idea of getting a second degree from a “recognized, secular institution,” so that if she left the Jewish community and entered the public sector, having a degree from a USC would make her “a lot more well rounded than the degree at AJU.” In the end, she believes that USC was the determining factor and that she enrolled in SJCS because of USC. However, for some students the Jewish component of their academics was the more important part of the dual degree program. For example, a SJCS student getting her dual degree in the USC School of Social Work applied to several other esteemed Social Work programs, including UC Berkeley and UCLA. For her, the determining factor was that USC’s Social Work program had a partnership with SJCS; otherwise, she would have chosen one of the other programs.

Some students were not able to break apart their dual degrees to identify which aspect of the partnership was most appealing; they believe it to be the combination of the two programs that attracted them. An SJCS student who is a dual degree student in USC’s School of Social Work said that while she knew she wanted to work in the Jewish community, she

wanted to find a program “that would lend itself to that, but that was also broad enough that I could work in any facet I wanted to.”

Another factor that was taken into consideration by students in regards to the dual degree programs was the institutions’ reputations and years in existence. One of the students attending the Hornstein/Heller program remarked that he was attracted to his program because of its “years of experience, its good network and the faculty is larger than Wagner,” mainly due to the fact that the Wagner/Skirball program is relatively new. He also felt that in terms of reputation, “Hornstein has better cache because it has been around for longer; everyone knows the name and alumni from the program.” A similar argument could be made about SJCS, as both programs have been in existence for roughly 40 years. Yet, in an interview with a student from the Wagner/Skirball program, she commented that she felt that the Hornstein program “used to be the premier program and NYU was the up and coming program,” and she wanted to be a part of that. Interview respondents looked at the age and establishment of a program as both a positive and a negative. When looking at SJCS and Hornstein, students who were attracted to these programs felt that their being in existence longer contributed greater prestige regarding their reputation and academic standing. However, when speaking to students enrolled at Wagner/Skirball, they felt that the newness of the program gave it a potential advantage.

For many of the students interviewed, academic rankings of the institutions/departments awarding the professional degree were important when considering where to obtain their dual degree. A dual degree student in the Wagner/Skirball program said that it was important to her that the program was “in the top ten for public service programs, because it would open a lot of doors.” She continued on to say that she felt that getting a

degree from a research university, like Wagner, had a different cache than getting a degree from a seminary, like SJCS. According to the most recent US News and World Report rankings of policy schools, the Wagner program is ranked number ten. (U.S. News & World Report 2008) However, the Wagner student failed to recognize that she was not comparing two secular institutions, but rather a Judaic and a secular program. If the comparison was between Wagner and USC, instead of SJCS, then USC is actually ranked number seven for policy schools. (U.S. News & World Report 2008) The fact that there may be confusion about this is important for SJCS to factor into its branding strategy.

Although the Wagner student's comment was inaccurate, it does bring up a significant point about what students look at when examining the Judaic portion of their dual degree. During the interview process, students were asked whether they considered SJCS to be a Reform institution due to its association with HUC. A student attending Hornstein said that he did not consider SJCS because it was Reform, and he "wanted to attend a more secular school," even though the Judaic aspect of his dual degree was very important to him. A second year student from Wagner/Skirball made a similar statement; this student is getting her dual degree in Judaic studies because she wanted "to round out her Jewish literacy and give her credibility as a Jewish leader...but she didn't want to get a degree from a seminary because she doesn't associate with a specific denomination." However, neither student was aware that SJCS is actually a non-denominational program based within the confines of a Reform institution. Again, SJCS will need to address this perception and misconception in its subsequent marketing materials.

One of the most distinctive differences between SJCS's dual degree program and that of AJU, Wagner and Hornstein is that SJCS is the only institution that has a partnership with

another school (USC) that is not already part of its existing institutional structure. For example, the Hornstein program offers dual degrees with the Heller school, but both are Brandeis programs. The same is true of the Wagner/Skirball program, which are both divisions of New York University, as well as of AJU, which offers dual degrees with other programs within the institution. SJCS and USC, however, are completely separate institutions and are not related or connected, other than through a Memorandum of Understanding.

Another major differential in the partnership between USC and SJCS is that it allows for a substantial number of dual degree options that the other programs do not offer. While the other programs offer at most two different types of dual degrees, because of SJCS and USC's partnership, there are five dual degree opportunities offered. However, currently, prospective students of SJCS are largely unaware of the extensive number of dual degree options available to them. SJCS needs to emphasize these options and advertise them, as a part of its branding strategy. Not only does this give students more choice and expand the pool of prospective students, but it also produces a more diverse student body and cohort community.

### **Pre-attendance Contact**

All of the individuals interviewed for this study acknowledged that they had some form of pre-attendance contact with the graduate institutions that they were interested in attending. The contact took a variety of forms, ranging from one-on-one meetings with staff and/or faculty, Open Houses, colloquiums or interviews. Most of those interviewed felt that their pre-attendance contact contributed significantly to their final decision on where to attend graduate school. However, some students felt that they were influenced more by their

interaction with the faculty and staff, while others felt that they got a better sense of the programs from their interactions with the entire school at the Open House and colloquiums.

In examining SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein, each of these programs presents potential students with the opportunity to explore their programs prior to applying and attending. Almost all of the students interviewed said that they took advantage of the opportunity and spent some time on the campuses they applied to prior to making a final decision on where to attend. Many identified these pre-attendance visits as a strong decision determinant. Some interview respondents felt that the strongest influencer was their interaction with the faculty and staff. A student in the Wagner/Skirball program commented that when she came to New York, she met with one of the co-directors of the program and heard about the resources available to the students, and she knew she would be getting “an education from one of the top Judaic studies departments with the top faculty within each of the disciplines.” A Hornstein student, who felt that his pre-attendance interaction with the staff and faculty at the program is what influenced his decision, echoed this sentiment. On his visit to the Brandeis campus, he sat in on one of the classes and met with Jonathan Sarna, the head of the Hornstein program, and Len Saxe, one of the faculty. He later went to visit the Wagner program and met with some of their faculty, but his interaction with Sarna and Saxe left such an impression on him that he ultimately chose to attend Hornstein.

During an interview with a member of the admissions staff at HUC, she mentioned, “recruitment happens until the first day of classes,” which a student in the SJCS program confirmed through her pre-attendance contact. The SJCS student said that she was in contact with this admissions staff member through the entire process, and she felt that the staff member “really invested in me, she was very welcoming and opening...I don’t remember the



name of anyone from Brandeis,” the other program she was looking to attend. Another SJCS student reflected on her pre-attendance contact and remarked that she interviewed with staff at the school before she accepted, she sat in on a class, met with students and toured the campus. She felt this experience influenced her decision positively, as it helped her to “get a sense of the community and how small the community was and how nice the people were.” She further commented that while she was already leaning towards attending SJCS, the experience solidified her decision.

Some SJCS students also identified the Open House that HUC holds twice a year, as a positive influence on their final decisions to attend. HUC’s Open House provides an opportunity for students to come from across the country to see all of the schools programs in action, including SJCS. During the Open House, current students and alumni provide hospitality for prospective students and the school subsidizes a portion of their travel. A member of the HUC admissions staff remarked that the Open House is designed to “develop those peer conversations.” A SJCS student said that following her attendance at the Open House, “there was no questions of the learning environment, as far as which was my first choice.” She felt that the Open House “spoke to everyone, touching on academics and their internships and speaking about the community.” She compared her experience at SJCS’s Open House to her visit to Hornstein, where she felt that people there took her around because they “got a free lunch out of it,” whereas at SJCS, “it was because they cared about the program and wanted to reinvest in the program, because they cared who was coming in next year.”

The two students interviewed from AJU had similar reactions regarding their pre-attendance contact. While they both felt that they were recruited prior to applying to the

program, once their applications were in, there was little contact with the school. Both students attended AJU's Open House, which has a different format from SJCS, and had contact with students prior to attending the school, but neither felt that it influenced their decision much. One of the students said that she attended a colloquium at AJU before school began, where current students, former students, the dean and the assistant dean of the program and professors all spoke. From the experience, she commented that the "community felt comfortable," however, she still felt that she sought the school out more than the school sought her out.

SJCS's Open House format provides a unique opportunity for prospective students, as it gives them a chance to experience what it would be like to be a student in the program. While other programs offer students the occasion to visit their campus, SJCS's Open House runs over two days and immerses potential applicants into student life. The Open House also exposes prospective students to the variety of dual degree partnerships that SJCS has with USC, as there are also representatives from the various USC departments present. In terms of a branding strategy, SJCS's Open House format and pre-attendance contact is particular to the program and should be referenced as such. Prospective students should be made aware that they have the opportunity to engage in a day in the life of a student in the program, to experience what their potential educational experience could entail.

## **Other Findings**

### ***Cost***

Although initially it was thought that cost would be a significant factor, it turned out to be relatively minor. Of the individuals interviewed, many acknowledged that cost was a

consideration in applying to graduate school; however, they did not characterize it as a differentiating concern as they were aware of the high expense of graduate school, regardless of where they attended.

Interviewees identified that the wide variety of scholarships and fellowships available was a factor in why many of them felt that the expense of graduate school was not a large concern. SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein all offer scholarship opportunities to students, and there are a wide range of national scholarship possibilities available to graduate students within the Jewish community. For example, The Jewish Federations of North America offers the FEREP (Federation Executive Recruitment and Education Program) Scholarship, which is available to “talented individuals who have excelled in their previous endeavors and are dedicated to working in the Jewish community.” (The Jewish Federations of North America 2010) Prospective students applying for the scholarship must be attending a FEREP recognized program, which SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein all qualify, and the program awards up to \$40,000 to students in return for a commitment of two years of paid work with a Federation. A student attending SJCS said that she knew that she had a FEREP scholarship before she even applied to graduate school, so she did not have to worry too much about cost when applying. Interviewees at SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein were also recipients of graduate scholarships from the Wexner Fellowship, the Jewish Community Center’s of North America Graduate Scholarship Programs and the Professional Leaders Project.

While SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein are essentially comparable in cost, the scholarships that each program offers do differentiate the institutions. For example, Hornstein advertises full tuition scholarships and Wagner is known to provide up to three-fourths or more. On a straight comparison, this is where SJCS is at a disadvantage, as it is

only able to offer up to seventy-five percent scholarship on tuition, and only for the HUC component of the dual degree program.

Some students were more attracted to SJCS and AJU because they felt that the cost of living on the West Coast was cheaper than on the East Coast. One student felt that AJU appealed to her, not because of the base cost of the program, but because it offers night classes allowing her to work full time during the day, offsetting some of the cost of graduate school. Dual degree students at SJCS and USC, while conscious that they had to pay tuition to two schools, were attracted by the potential to receive up to seventy-five percent in financial assistance from HUC, as well as the fact that they got a twenty-five percent discount in tuition from USC. A student in the program commented that when she did some research she discovered that it was “just about equal to get two degrees here [SJCS and USC] as it was to get one degree from USC.”

One of the admissions staff at HUC remarked that the number one question she is asked about their programs, including SJCS is, “How much is this going to cost me?” From her perspective, this is not always an easy question to answer for dual degree students, because there is financial aid available from HUC for SJCS students, as well as outside scholarships and fellowships, and separate opportunities available from USC. For most of the students attending graduate school, they knew that they were going to incur the cost of their education, so as one student said “I always knew graduate school was something that I would do, so cost was a consideration but not a deterrent.” In terms of branding for SJCS, while it is comparable in cost to AJU, Wagner and Hornstein, it is at a disadvantage because it is only able to offer a scholarship towards HUC’s tuition and not USC’s. However, it would still be beneficial for the program to highlight its scholarship, the wide variety of support available

within the Jewish community, and the fact that because of their partnership, USC discounts its tuition to SJCS students.

### ***Faculty***

When asked if faculty was an important variable in deciding where to apply or attend graduate school, more students attending Wagner and Hornstein said that it was important than students at SJCS and AJU. This is in part because members of the faculty at Wagner and Hornstein are more renowned for their research contributions in field of Jewish professional studies. However, what was surprising was the response from SJCS students regarding faculty in hindsight, after they had begun attending the school.

A student attending Hornstein, who also applied to Wagner, said that he looked at the faculty at both schools during his application process. He felt that “the faculty there [Hornstein] is larger than the Wagner faculty,” because the school has been around longer, which was of greater importance to him in terms of learning and networking. During his visit to the school, he also sat in on a class with Jonathan Sarna and he met with Len Saxe, both of whom extremely impressed him. The interviewee felt that it would be a once in a lifetime opportunity to learn with such impressive and highly accomplished Jewish scholars, and his interaction with them greatly influenced his decision. Similarly, a student attending Wagner felt that attending the program gave her the opportunity to “get an education from one of the top Judaic studies departments with the top faculty within each of the disciplines.” She was also very excited at the opportunity to be attending a smaller program where the professors knew each of the students by name, having come from a very large undergraduate institution.

Additionally, she liked the fact that Wagner was a research institution and that the faculty were actively engaged in studying what they were teaching.

In an interview with a student from AJU, she said that she considered faculty when looking at the institution and was impressed by the fact that they “were currently or had been working in the field that they were teaching, which was important because it is the best way to learn, as they have a lot of experience.” However, this student was from Los Angeles and another student, also attending AJU, who was not from the area, said she did not look at the faculty because she would not have recognized anybody.

When speaking with students at SJCS, most of them said that they did not consider faculty when they initially researched or applied to the program. However, they also said that in hindsight they would tell prospective students that they should look at the faculty at SJCS when examining the school, as it is an asset and strength of the program that should be highlighted. One student remarked that she valued SJCS because of the “ratio of faculty to students” and the individualized attention that this allows. Another student commented on the faculty’s “innovative” style of teaching and how they are able to “make things happen with a little bit of resources.” Interviewees from SJCS also expressed their appreciation for the fact that some of the faculty had practical experience working in the profession, which helped to contextualize their learning.

Overall, while faculty is a minor consideration for most students in the application process for graduate school, almost every SJCS student interviewed listed the faculty as an under recognized asset and strength of the program which needs to be more prominently featured. While most students at SJCS did not look at faculty prior to attendance, in branding the program it might be beneficial to take into consideration the asset of the faculty. SJCS

may consider providing biographical information on its faculty, especially those who have worked or are currently working within the Jewish community, as well as faculty members' philosophies of education, to highlight their innovative teaching styles.

### ***Image***

Initially, the image of a graduate program was thought to be a strong determinant in where a prospective student planned to apply and attend. However, in conducting the competitive analysis of SJCS, Wagner, Hornstein and AJU, there was a consistent opinion that all of the programs' public images were lacking, and therefore, it was not a strong decision determinant. The image of a graduate program refers to its self-presentation, including the visual and written documentation, as well as online content, such as the program's website.

In the interviews, students often commented that their graduate institution's online image was poor, compared to other programs' websites that they had viewed during their initial search into graduate school. A student attending Hornstein said, "The website of Wagner is not as good as the one at Brandeis," and a student at SJCS commented, "Both schools are bad," referring to Brandeis and SJCS's websites. Students felt that program websites did not provide the necessary information that they were looking for and did not highlight the right information. In discussing the content on HUC's website, which has a section dedicated to SJCS, a student said, "it tells me too much, but not enough of what I need to know." She suggested that it include more information about its partnership with USC, including the fact that its MPA program is ranked number seven in the country.

Students also felt the program websites were not user friendly. A student who looked at both SJCS and AJU found both of the websites hard to navigate: “HUC’s website was confusing, I did not know what was what...With AJU, I was not exactly impressed with their website, and it was hard to find things.” An alumni of the SJSC recalls the website as being “off putting and not very accessible,” and while it provided her the basic information she needed, she found it frustrating to have to dig through the rest of the site’s content to get to the where she wanted to be.

Interviewees also referenced the fact that the overall written content of the programs, both online and in print, was poorly presented, leading to a poor image of the school. A student from SJCS said that she found the written documentation provided to her “informative and what she needed,” but it “was not pretty or visually appealing.” When interviewing a member of the admissions staff of HUC, she said: “I can’t speak to our image because we don’t have one.” A student at Wagner echoed this sentiment about her graduate program; however, she said that the program has recently undergone a re-branding campaign to change its image. Reflecting on the school’s old image, she said that while all the documentation was unified and professional looking, it was not visually appealing. Additionally, she remembered that, “the website did not do the school justice and everything else spoke louder than that did.” However, she feels that Wagner’s rebranding campaign has since changed the program’s image for the better, as it is now seen everywhere and has a memorable visual representation.

While image was not found to be a strong decision determinant for students for graduate school, it is important to note the rebranding efforts of Wagner and the effects that it has had on its self-presentation. In conducting a branding strategy, SJCS has the opportunity



to strengthen its image, including its written, visual and online documentation, to help set the school apart from other graduate programs.

### ***Reputation***

Most of the students interviewed identified reputation as a consideration in their application and decision making process for graduate school. However, for many of them, considering the reputation of the program meant looking at both the secular/professional and Judaic institutions/departments. Additionally, reputation constitutes a bigger issue, as it also encompasses the response elicited from other people when the students mention what graduate program they are attending, as well as when they asked people for advice on the various institutions.

Some interview subjects felt that the reputation of the secular/professional program that they were interested in was more important to them than the reputation of the Judaic program. A student in the dual degree program at SJCS and USC said, “I looked into it more at USC than at SJCS, especially for the Social Work program.” Another interviewee explained how reputation impacted his decision of where to apply to graduate school, “I wanted to go to a school with a reputation and cache closer to an Ivy League School,” which he felt would be achieved at Brandeis University, with the Hornstein/Heller program. While the reputation of the secular institution was found to be a factor, a bigger variable for most interviewees was the reputation of the Judaic institution/department they were interested in, as well as the responses they received from others based on where they were interested in attending graduate school.

In looking at the reputation of the Judaic programs that interviewees were interested in, the first variable affecting reputation was their own religious affiliation, in relation to the institution's denominational position. For one interview subject who grew up in the Conservative movement, AJU had a more reputable name because that is what she knew through her childhood. A unique problem faced by SJCS is that it is a non-denominational program, housed under the auspices of HUC and the Reform movement. During interviews with both a student at Wagner and Hornstein, they commented that they did not even look at SJCS because they do not align with the Reform movement and therefore they did not believe it to be the right place for them. The Wagner student remarked that she felt that within the Jewish community, SJCS "was good in preparing rabbis, but it didn't carry the cache somewhere like Wagner did because it was a seminary." When informed that the program was non-denominational, the student from Wagner said she had just learned that this year, and the Hornstein student had just heard it for the first time.

The second variable affecting the reputation of how interviewees saw the Judaic programs was how people reacted when they heard where the students were applying to graduate school or when the interviewees asked for advice on the various graduate programs. For the most part, interviewees responded that they are met with a positive response about where they are enrolled in graduate school. An SJCS student reported, "If they are part of the Jewish community...I get a good response...if they are not familiar with the program, they are impressed, and I have never gotten a negative response." A student from AJU made a similar remark that "in the Jewish nonprofit world, it [AJU] is very well respected."

SJCS faces a particular and unique challenge in regard to reputation, because HUC is traditionally known for its rabbinical, educational and cantorial programs, whereas the Los

Angeles campus is the only campus with a Communal Service program. Therefore, SJCS interviewees said that they are often left to defend their program choice, telling people that they are not part of HUC's rabbinical, educational or cantorial schools and explaining that they are not becoming a rabbi. While most of the interview responses regarding reputation were positive, when interview subjects were asked about reputation in relation to what people said when they asked for advice on the various programs, the answers tended to be a bit more slanted. For example, a student attending Wagner did not even look into the Brandeis program because of the negative report her friend passed on to her, which she backed up with feedback from other people.

Overall, most interviewees said that reputation was a factor for them in deciding where to attend graduate school, however there were a few who said they did not consider it at all. For most of the students interviewed, it was easy for them to break down their institutions into the secular and Judaic programs and examine reputation through that lens. Yet, there were also a few interview subjects who felt that it was the combined reputation of the dual programs that was important for them in their decision making process. A dual degree student at SJCS and USC said the partnership between the two schools was very important: "It bumps up SJCS's reputation that it has such good standing with USC and can offer such good partnerships." In the end, in regard to the competitive analysis, it appears that reputation is a minor determinant in the graduate school application process. However, in branding SJCS, the program may consider downplaying its religious affiliation with HUC and highlighting its association with USC's highly regarded educational reputation.

## *Alumni*

Many of the individuals interviewed perceived a lack of an alumni network at their graduate institutions. In looking at SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein, the findings were consistent that there were relatively small alumni relations efforts in place and that the programs could do more to enhance their outreach to their alumni. However, in regards to potential students, none of the current graduate students interviewed mentioned that they looked at alumni networks in their application process. This provides SJCS with an opportunity to capitalize on creating a strong alumni network for its graduates, as many interviewees felt that the foundation for it already exists.

In speaking to current students, to assess the importance of alumni relations for prospective students, none of them said that they looked at this factor prior to applying to or attending their programs. Yet, some student's first introduction to their programs was through alumni. A member of the recruitment staff of HUC said that the program utilizes alumni to refer students to the program. An SJCS student confirmed this; she was referred by an alumna of the program who "made the pitch and told her about her experiences in the program," and she thought it would be a good fit. Regardless, during interviews with current students and alumni, all of them stressed the importance and desire for a stronger alumni network to be in place. A student at Wagner indicated that the school lacks such a network and that she and some of the other students in the program are working to set one up, so that they can "leverage the relationships they have formed, in the future."

As previously mentioned, alumni at SJCS are used to help in the recruitment process, but graduates of the program feel that there is a need for "more alumni relations, better communication and active recruitment to keep us involved." Last year, an extensive study

was done on the alumni of SJCS and, while students who graduate from SJCS are automatically enrolled in the Alumni Association, the study showed that only a third of graduates were aware of this. (Ingram 2009: 48) The study also found that alumni are interested in maintaining contact with SJCS and other alumni after graduation, crediting the program with some degree of their career success. In particular, alumni are interested in maintaining contact in order to give back to the program, rather than to receive any kind of tangible benefit in return. (Ingram 2009: 49) However, an alumna of SJCS did remark that the program could do a better job at providing career support, feeling as though the program only reaches out when the school is in “dire” financial need. Another alumna of the program felt that SJCS needed to diversify the members of the alumni that it reached out to; noting that “It’s usually the same people to be asked [to be involved] all the time and there are more of us who would be involved.”

When speaking with the students at SJCS, many of them felt that the foundation for a strong alumni network already existed and it simply needed to be better organized and utilized. One student suggested highlighting where alumni worked within the Jewish community, as it is widely known that they hold prominent positions within a wide range of Jewish organizations, locally and nationally. Another student, in reference to the assets and strengths of the internship process of SJCS, commented that she has already developed a strong network of professional contacts with alumni and a formalized alumni network would help to maintain those relationships post graduation. The unique spirit and connection of those currently enrolled in SJCS and those who have graduated extends beyond the walls of the program; a student enrolled at AJU reflected upon a recent experience at a conference

that she attended where there was “a kinship and alumni spirit at the program that is lacking at AJU.”

Taking into consideration all these factors, SJCS has an opportunity to strengthen its alumni network and increase the participation of its graduates. A stronger alumni community means a number of things from the perspective of potential student recruitment, including a larger pool of people from whom to recruit, due to there being more people to assist in the recruitment process. Additionally, because programs like AJU, Wagner and Hornstein currently do not have strong alumni networks in place, it would give SJCS an advantage. While a strong alumni network would provide advantages from a recruitment standpoint, it would also provide a fundraising benefit for SJCS, as alumni may increase their donations to the school if they continue to feel the strong connection to the program that they felt when they were enrolled.

### ***Sense of Community***

The sense of community within a graduate institution was originally thought to be a strong determining factor in where students applied. However, in conducting the competitive analysis of SJCS, AJU, Wagner and Hornstein on this criterion, it appears that, with the exception of SJCS, most interview subjects did not feel that there was a strong sense of community within their program. At SJCS, on the other hand, the strong sense of community is a positive factor for the school and something to focus on in developing its branding strategy.

Interviewees were asked to reflect on the sense of community surrounding their graduate program and if it influenced where they applied or attended. A student at Hornstein

commented that he liked the fact that the program he is now attending has a “cohort of fifteen people that you go to Israel with and take a seminar in New York with and you take the same Hornstein classes with for two years.” He felt that at Wagner, the program was looser and there were maybe three or four courses that incoming classes take together, making it less of a cohesive group. However, aside from this comment, no student, except those attending SJCS, referred to a sense of community within their program.

In fact, when interview subjects not attending SJCS referenced the cohort community, it was in reference to the sense of community that they had heard about at SJCS. A student at Wagner said, “From what I’ve heard at the SJCS program, it’s more like a gang of friends: they were spending all their time with their classmates...I would say that’s not so true here.” An AJU student, who currently lives with an SJCS student, spoke of this sense of community, which she has observed first hand. “I think the way they [SJCS] create a community for the students is extremely impressive, that everyone is a resource for each other and that the school seems to really be there for the students in guiding them as their students.” Another AJU student delved deeper into the difference between AJU and SJCS, crediting the lack of community at AJU in part to the structure of the program. She attributed the lack of community to the fact that unlike SJCS, the program has not created an effective way to bring people together over the two-year program; essentially the problem is that there is “no community building...there is no effort to create a network.”

Students at SJCS feel that the sense of community in their program is a strong draw and is evident before someone begins attending the school. A student at SJCS knew that she wanted to attend the program after her visit to the school’s Open House. Maintaining the sense of community at SJCS is an important factor within the program and is taken into

consideration when reviewing potential applicants. A member of the HUC admissions staff said that part of reviewing applicants is determining whether they have what the school refers to as the “*mensch* factor,” whether or not the person is going to fit into the SJCS community. Students at SJCS feel that the community surrounding their program not only provides them a strong sense of belonging while they are enrolled, but the benefits extended beyond graduation. For example, a student attending SJCS feels that her SJCS community has expanded her networks and connections within the Jewish community, which she feels will be invaluable to her success upon graduation.

Overall, the sense of community may not be a strong determining factor in where students apply or attend graduate institutions, but SJCS has the opportunity to highlight the strength of its community as a differentiating factor. In speaking with students at AJU, Wagner and Hornstein, even though community was not a factor in their graduate school application process, they are envious of the strong communal nature of the SJCS cohort. It is therefore likely that demonstrating the strength of SJCS’s community may have an influence on prospective students in the future and should be considered in branding the program.



## **Recommendations**

A branding strategy should emphasize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of the product/program. This study has found a number of both that can help inform a branding strategy for SJCS aimed at prospective students. While all of the findings will help to improve recruitment of potential students, they also can help to increase the financial support and overall recognition of SJCS. A branding strategy should also look at broader concepts and ideas; in the case of SJCS, these include improving its communications and strengthening its external partnerships.

### ***Location***

As this study indicates, students tend to look at where a school is located in deciding where they would like to attend graduate school. Therefore, SJCS may want to focus more of its marketing efforts on the West Coast versus the East Coast. That is not to say that the school should not market the program on the East Coast at all, but that people have a general geographic location in mind before applying to graduate school, and those interested in being on the West Coast are more likely to consider SJCS. SJCS may want to emphasize that it not just a school, it is located in Los Angeles, giving students access to the second largest Jewish community in the nation. Additionally, in its printed materials, SJCS has the opportunity to highlight some of the unique qualities of Los Angeles that make it an appealing place for people to visit and live, such as its weather, proximity to Hollywood and other points of interest, the beaches, and its central location to other major California cities.

### ***Name Change***

Interview responses indicated that undergoing a name change at SJCS is going to present a number of challenges. In marketing and branding its new name to prospective students, SJCS needs to remember to consider Social Work students who could potentially be turned off by the name School of Jewish Nonprofit Management. As mentioned in the findings section, SJCS may want to use the opportunity of the name change to promote the additional skills students will obtain within the program and their potential for “higher professional mobility.” SJCS should consider including in its written and online material, explanations of its courses, so that reluctant students can see the breadth of the work they will be doing, as well as be made aware that the program is not limited to a narrow focus.

In addition to ensuring that Social Work students do not feel excluded by the program’s new name, it is important that SJCS consider the inclusion of other key groups. The program might want to consider targeting certain groups like alumni, donors and community influencers during the rolling out of the new name. It is integral to SJCS’s success that during the renaming process it includes and informs alumni so that it does not alienate the networks created by pre- and post name change graduates. Additionally, it is equally important to include donors and community influencers, so that the attempt at changing the image of SJCS is cohesive and unified during the name change process.

### ***Internships***

This study found that affiliates of the SJCS program feel that one of its strongest assets is its internship program and structure. Thus, it makes sense for SJCS to make this a prominent feature in its branding strategy aimed at prospective students, as it shows not only

the immediate benefits of the program, but also the long-term ones. To start, SJCS should focus on the notion that its internship program is unlike that at any of the competitor institutions. This gives SJCS the ability to market the fact that it is unique in the opportunities that it presents to its students and that it provides experiences that others cannot.

Some of the unique qualities SJCS may want to highlight about its internship program include:

- Only at SJCS do students intern for two years, allowing them to experience different areas of interest and expand their professional network.
- SJCS accompanies its internship requirement with a practicum class, where students meet regularly, are asked to apply their educational learning to their practical skills and vice versa, and are provided with a safe and secure classroom environment where they can discuss issues pertaining to the work environment. Essentially, SJCS is providing professional training for practitioners.
- SJCS has staff members dedicated to its internship program who are responsible for advocating on behalf of the students, ensuring that they are in the proper internship placement and that they are enhancing and developing their personal and professional skills. The staff member also serves as a liaison between the students and their supervisors, acting as a mentor, career advisor and confidant.

Another branding opportunity for SJCS, in relation to its internship program, is the opinion of the Los Angeles Jewish community about the quality of work and level of

professionalism of SJCS interns. SJCS may consider including testimonials of influencers in the Los Angeles Jewish community who have worked with SJCS interns, to demonstrate the type of work the students have the chance to engage in, as well as their opinions about the level of the students' professionalism and productivity. In conjunction with these testimonials, SJCS may want to include some from students who have gone through the internship experience in its branding material, as many of them commented in the interviews that the internship experience helped to expand their professional network. While this was in part due to their actual internships, many of them also credited this fact to the interview process they had to undergo before their second year placement. Additionally, they attributed this to the "Wacky Wednesday" course, as the "Introduction to Jewish Communal Institutions" course is affectionately called, which gives first year students a glimpse of the possible field placement opportunities during their first summer in the program.

### ***Dual Degree/Partnership***

The dual degree partnership between SJCS and USC offers another beneficial branding opportunity. Currently, while the partnership between SJCS and USC is known, neither party highlights it enough. The partnership between the two schools provides a significant opportunity to increase prospective students' interest in SJCS. However, SJCS needs to work with USC to ensure that the staff at USC has a better understanding of what the SJCS program is and its benefits, so that they are informed when speaking to interested students. As this study revealed, students come to find SJCS from a number of avenues, including seeing information about it on the USC website. SJCS should ensure that its partnership with USC is more than simply academic and that both institutions are benefitting

from the other institution's recruitment and referral efforts of prospective students, when appropriate.

In looking at how SJCS can further use its partnership with USC to improve its branding strategy for prospective students, it makes sense for the program to highlight the wide variety of options it offers for dual Master Degrees. AJU, Wagner and Hornstein offer, at most, two different kinds of dual or joint degree Masters; however, SJCS and USC offer five different types of degrees. Unlike the other programs mentioned, the partnership between SJCS and USC is also the only one that exists between two separate academic institutions. SJCS may want to feature in its branding material that students will receive two separate Master degrees, from two separate graduate institutions, as opposed to the other programs, where students will receive two degrees, but from only one school.

The high ranking of USC's academic programs is also an asset to SJCS and one that should be utilized more effectively. If a prospective student goes to Wagner's website, there is a headline stating, "NYU Wagner Ranks in Top 10 According to US News & World Report," which is undoubtedly a selling point for students. (NYU Wagner, 2008) SJCS has an even better opportunity to market its relationship with USC, because while the policy program at Wagner is ranked number ten, the same program is ranked number seven at USC.

### ***Pre-attendance Contact***

In factoring pre-attendance contact into SJCS's branding strategy, HUC's Open House format provides a unique opportunity in comparison to AJU, Wagner and Hornstein. Unlike the other programs, SJCS offers students the chance to immerse themselves into what life is like as a student, by spending two days visiting the campus and meeting with students,

faculty, staff and alumni, as well as sitting in on various classes. SJCS may want to highlight this to prospective students, as it can help contextualize what the next two years of their life will be like. Additionally, in branding the program to prospective students, SJCS should mention that it subsidizes a portion of the travel cost and can arrange accommodations for them to stay with current students and alumni. This experience will help students who may be considering applying with the occasion to meet with likeminded individuals, to ask questions and to engage in peer conversations to determine if the program is right for them.

### ***Cost***

When considering cost, SJCS is relatively similar to AJU, Wagner and Hornstein. However, the program cannot subsidize the tuition as much as Hornstein or Wagner, so cost is not something that SJCS should dwell on in a branding strategy. What it can do is emphasize the fact that getting the dual degree from SJCS and USC costs about the same as getting one graduate degree from USC alone, due to the 25% discount on tuition that USC offers to SJCS dual degree students together with the generous scholarships which SJCS offers to its students. Additionally, prospective students are also eligible for the same national scholarships that they would be if they went to any other graduate program. Finally, in attending the dual degree program at USC, prospective students may also be eligible for scholarships offered exclusively by USC.

### ***Image/Faculty***

SJCS needs to address its self-presentation in its branding strategy by developing new written, visual and online material. The program should consider developing materials that

are more visually stimulating and that also provide the information that prospective students would want to know. SJCS may want to consider highlighting its faculty in this material, providing brief biographies and a listing of the courses the faculty members teach. To further enhance its image, SJCS should consider providing testimonials from current and former students and displaying photos of student life. It would be beneficial for SJCS to rebuild its website, making it easier to navigate, more informative and visually stimulating, and more in line with the image created by the new branding strategy.

Once the program has addressed its self-presentation, it should then consider some new marketing strategies. Taking into consideration the findings about the importance of location, SJCS may want to send its new materials to all West Coast Jewish Federations, college campus Hillel's, synagogues and camps, as well as conduct viral marketing on a variety of social networking sites, to assist in its efforts to continue to reach prospective students.

### ***Reputation***

In the reputation findings section of this study, it was noted that prospective students give considerable consideration to the Judaic portion of their dual degree. However, because SJCS is a non-denominational program housed within a Reform institution, the program needs to be careful in how it negotiates this relationship. Therefore, SJCS should clarify to prospective students that it is non-denominational, but at the same time recognize that it is a part of the larger structure of HUC, which is a movement-based institution. Overall, it might be more beneficial for SJCS to put more effort into highlighting the reputation of USC, as it is a widely respected academic institution.

## ***Alumni***

Although most interview respondents said they did not look at whether a program had a strong alumni network when deciding where to apply or attend graduate school, instituting one would give SJCS an advantage over other programs. As indicated in the respective findings section, the foundation for a strong alumni network already exists for SJCS. Many SJCS alumni are eager and willing to be involved in an alumni capacity; they just do not feel like there is a formalized system set up for them to do so.

SJCS should consider enhancing its alumni network not only for the benefit of alumni, but also for the benefits of branding the program to prospective students. A strong alumni network would allow SJCS to showcase that the school turns out prominent Jewish professional leaders both locally and nationwide. This in turn could lead to helping to place and provide career guidance to students, as there would be a large alumni network from which to draw resources. Another area of strength of an alumni network, which SJCS may want to utilize, relates to the fact that SJCS often asks alumni to refer students to the program. Having a strong alumni network is more likely to keep graduates connected, involved and abreast of what the current developments are in the program, making it easier for them to recommend SJCS. Finally, increasing alumni relations could likely lead an increase in fundraising dollars to SJCS. With an increase in dollars, SJCS would be able to have more resources, potentially including more scholarships for prospective students.

## ***Sense of Community***

The final element SJCS should consider displaying in its branding strategy aimed at prospective students is its strong sense of community. While interview respondents said that



this was not a strong decision determinant, they all commented on the strong communal nature of SJCS, including students currently enrolled at Wagner, Hornstein and AJU. For the purposes of branding, SJCS should capitalize on this facet of the program, as it is an area where it clearly excels beyond the other schools in question. SJCS should consider including photos of student life, from within school grounds and outside, as well as student testimonials. In addition, SJCS should include statements from members of the Jewish community about their perception of the SJCS student and alumni community. Additionally, because the sense of community at SJCS lasts beyond the student experience, the program may consider including testimonials from groups of alumni, so that they can speak to their continued involvement with the school and their former classmates.

## **Conclusion**

This is an opportune moment for SJCS to undergo a branding campaign: the program recently celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the school's director, Richard Siegel, released a new strategic plan. In addition, as the program prepares to undergo a name change, moving ahead with a branding campaign will help to propel the school forward and present its new vision and image.

This study has found a number of strong assets to emphasize in branding SJCS, such as its dual degree partnership with USC, its internship program, and its sense of community. And there are also some negatives that the program needs to address. With a well-designed branding strategy, the school is well positioned to develop a new image that will be even more attractive to prospective students, both in itself and in relation to its primary competitors.

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## Appendix A

### Interview guide for students attending Wagner, Hornstein or AJU

1. How old are you?
2. What graduate program are you currently attending?
3. Where were you living before graduate school?
4. Where did you do your undergraduate studies?
5. What other graduate programs did you apply to?
6. How did you find out about the program you are attending?
7. How did you find out about the programs that you applied to?
8. Why did you decide to attend the institution that you are at?
  - a. How big a factor was...
    - i. Cost
    - ii. Scholarship or fellowships
    - iii. Location
    - iv. Options for academic programs/partnerships
      1. How important was the dual degree aspect of the programs you applied to?
    - v. Faculty
    - vi. Reputation
      1. What constitutes a good graduate school reputation?
      2. Was name recognition a factor?
    - vii. School's self presentation
      1. Was the presentation of the school a factor?
        - a. Visually?
        - b. The written documentation?
        - c. The website?
        - d. The online feedback?
      2. Was the perception of the institution a factor?
    - viii. Contact with school's faculty, students and administration prior to applying
      1. Did other people you know and respect, who have attended the program or recommended the program, influence your decision?
    - ix. Alumni relations
9. Was it important/necessary for you to work while attending graduate school?
  - a. If yes, where are you working?
10. Did you consider applying to SJCS?
  - a. How did you find out about SJCS?
  - b. In regards to SJCS, was the location a factor?
  - c. Name recognition?
  - d. Perception of the institution?
  - e. Faculty?
  - f. Money?
  - g. Scholarships?

- h. Recommendations?
  - i. Presentation of the program?
  - j. Alumni relations?
- 11. The school is considering changing its name to, School of Jewish Nonprofit Management, would (and how would) that change your perception of the program?
  - a. In what way would it change your perception?

## Appendix B

### Interview guide for students attending SJCS

1. How old are you?
2. What graduate program are you currently attending?
3. Where were you living before graduate school?
4. Where did you do your undergraduate studies?
5. What other graduate programs did you apply to?
6. How did you find out about the program you are attending?
7. How did you find out about the programs that you applied to?
8. Why did you decide to attend the institution that you are at?
  - a. How big a factor was...
    - i. Cost
    - ii. Scholarship or fellowships
    - iii. Location
    - iv. Options for academic programs/partnerships
      1. How important was the dual degree aspect of the programs you applied to?
    - v. Faculty
    - vi. Reputation
      1. What constitutes a good graduate school reputation?
      2. Was name recognition a factor?
    - vii. School's self presentation
      1. Was the presentation of the school a factor?
        - a. Visually?
        - b. The written documentation?
        - c. The website?
        - d. The online feedback?
      2. Was the perception of the institution a factor?
    - viii. Contact with school's faculty, students and administration prior to applying
      1. Did other people you know and respect, who have attended the program or recommended the program, influence your decision?
    - ix. Alumni relations
9. Was it important/necessary for you to work while attending graduate school?
  - a. If yes, where are you working?
10. The school is considering changing its name to, School of Jewish Nonprofit Management, would (and how would) that change your perception of the program?
  - a. In what way would it change your perception?
11. When you tell people what graduate school you are attending, what do your peers, colleagues, fellow students (non-HUC) think about the program?
  - a. Do they know the program?
  - b. Do you have to explain the program?

12. What do you think are the assets or strengths that are not sufficiently recognized or played up to the external community or public?
13. What would you like to see changed regarding the external presentation of SJCS?
14. What would you like to see changed regarding the image of SJCS?

## Appendix C

### Interview guide for alumni of SJCS

1. How old are you?
2. What graduate program did attend?
3. Where were you living before graduate school?
4. Where did you do your undergraduate studies?
5. What other graduate programs did you apply to?
6. How did you find out about the program you are attending?
7. How did you find out about the programs that you applied to?
8. Why did you decide to attend the institution that you are at?
  - a. How big a factor was...
    - i. Cost
    - ii. Scholarship or fellowships
    - iii. Location
    - iv. Options for academic programs/partnerships
      1. How important was the dual degree aspect of the programs you applied to?
    - v. Faculty
    - vi. Reputation
      1. What constitutes a good graduate school reputation?
      2. Was name recognition a factor?
    - vii. School's self presentation
      1. Was the presentation of the school a factor?
        - a. Visually?
        - b. The written documentation?
        - c. The website?
        - d. The online feedback?
      2. Was the perception of the institution a factor?
    - viii. Contact with school's faculty, students and administration prior to applying
      1. Did other people you know and respect, who have attended the program or recommended the program, influence your decision?
    - ix. Alumni relations
9. Was it important/necessary for you to work while attending graduate school?
  - a. If yes, where are you working?
10. The school is considering changing its name to, School of Jewish Nonprofit Management, would (and how would) that change your perception of the program?
  - a. In what way would it change your perception?
11. When you tell people what graduate school you attended, what do/did your peers, colleagues, fellow students (non-HUC) think about the program?
  - a. Do they know the program?
  - b. Do you have to explain the program?



12. What do you think are the assets or strengths that are not sufficiently recognized or played up to the external community or public?
13. What would you like to see changed regarding the external presentation of SJCS?
14. What would you like to see changed regarding the image of SJCS?
15. How did attending SJCS affect your career?
16. Would you recommend SJCS?

## Appendix D

### Interview guide for Jewish community influencers

1. Where do you live?
2. What is your current occupation?
3. Did you attend graduate school?
  - a. Where did you go?
4. What do you know about SJCS?
5. What do you know about Wagner? Hornstein? AJU?
6. Do you have a better opinion of one over another?
  - a. Why?
7. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of SJCS vs. Brandeis-Hornstein?
8. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of SJCS vs. NYU Wagner?
9. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of SJCS vs. AJU?
  - a. Cost
  - b. Scholarships
  - c. Location
  - d. Faculty
  - e. Reputation
  - f. Partnership
  - g. Perception/Image
  - h. Personal involvement with students careers
    - i. (Are the program more than just academic programs, do they support their graduate students afterwards in their career?)
  - i. Alumni
10. What would you like to see changed regarding the external presentation of SJCS?
11. What would you like to see changed regarding the image of SJCS?
12. What is your current perception of SJCS?
13. SJCS is currently thinking of changing the programs name to School of Jewish Nonprofit Management, would this affect your image/perception of the program?
  - a. If yes, how?
14. Would you recommend SJCS?

## Appendix E

### Interview guide for donors to SJCS

1. Where do you live?
2. What is your current occupation?
3. Did you attend graduate school?
  - a. Where did you go?
4. What do you know about SJCS?
5. What do you look for when donating to an institution?
6. Why do you contribute to SJCS?
7. What do you know about Wagner? Hornstein? AJU?
8. Do you have a better opinion of one over another?
  - a. Why?
9. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of SJCS vs. Brandeis-Hornstein?
10. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of SJCS vs. NYU Wagner?
11. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of SJCS vs. AJU?
  - a. Cost
  - b. Scholarships
  - c. Location
  - d. Faculty
  - e. Reputation
  - f. Partnership
  - g. Perception/Image
  - h. Personal involvement with students careers
    - i. (Are the program more than just academic programs, do they support their graduate students afterwards in their career?)
  - i. Alumni
12. What would you like to see changed regarding the external presentation of SJCS?
13. What would you like to see changed regarding the image of SJCS?
14. What is your current perception of SJCS?
15. SJCS is currently thinking of changing the programs name to School of Jewish Nonprofit Management, would this affect your image/perception of the program?
  - a. If yes, how?
16. Would you recommend SJCS?