

The Influence of JFCS Holocaust Center Programming on Participants' Lives



AT A GLANCE

This report analyzes the long-term impact of participation in five JFCS Holocaust Center programs from 2012 to 2022 and shows that program involvement positively influenced participants' life trajectories.

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The mission of the Jewish Family and Children's Services Holocaust Center is to create a future where the lessons of the Holocaust are taught and remembered, cultivating a world that stands against antisemitism, hate, and dehumanization.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What do young people take away from learning about the Holocaust and genocide? The answer is complicated, but this report sheds light on this question through the analysis of the experiences of over 50 young people who participated in Jewish Family and Children's Services Holocaust Center (the Holocaust Center) programming between 2012 and 2022. These respondents represent a diverse group of program participants: one-third were people of color, and two-thirds were not Jewish. Drawing on the findings of a survey and interviews with program alumni, this report shows that taking part in Holocaust and genocide educational programming has a powerful impact.

Genocide Education Changes People

Young people shared that they felt changed by the Holocaust Center's programs. Majorities of participants across the survey and interviews indicated that participating in the program had:

- Increased their empathy for others
- Made them more courageous in confronting hate and bias
- Increased their media literacy
- Taught them to think more deeply about the world

Taken together, along with the development of critical thinking skills embedded in the program designs, many participants described the experience as pivotal, equipping them to handle the challenges of modern life.

Young People Retain and Use Their Knowledge

When asked, young people across programs readily shared both general and specific recollections of what they had learned. They talked about learning about dehumanization and injustice; many of them focused on three things they retained from their time with the Holocaust Center:

- The importance of survivor testimony
- Knowledge of specific genocides (e.g., Armenian, Bosnian, Cambodian, the Holocaust, Indigenous Peoples of California, Rwandan, Uyghur, Yazidi)
- Use of propaganda in genocide

Participants also described how they continued to make use of what they learned, ranging from educating others to being better consumers of media. Young people shared that they found the skill development embedded in the Holocaust Center programs incredibly useful as well.

Genocide Education Is Influential

Everyone who took part in the study indicated that their experiences in Holocaust Center programs influenced their lives. The most common areas that people stated had changed for them were:

- Educational trajectories
- Sense of civic responsibilities
- Personal beliefs/values

Genocide Education Leads to Lifelong Learners (and Doers)

Nearly every person who shared their experiences with us indicated that they had continued to learn more about the Holocaust and genocide. Some participants noted that they took college courses, selected a minor, or even devoted the focus of their education to the study of genocide. Others related that they volunteered at Holocaust and genocide events or museums. Many also talked about how they drew on the lessons learned during their programs and how they carry these lessons with them: standing up for others, working against hate, and honoring survivors by educating others about genocide.

INTRODUCTION

Experiencing Holocaust and genocide education can be profoundly impactful. The Jewish Family and Children's Services Holocaust Center (the Holocaust Center) has engaged young people in Holocaust and genocide teaching and learning since 1979.¹ Over that time, numerous programs have been offered to school-age children, youth, and young adults. The Holocaust Center's programs have evolved, but five core programs have been consistently offered across multiple years this past decade (see Appendix, Table 1 for program descriptions):

- Manovill Fellowship/Seminar
- University Fellowship
- The Next Chapter
- Conversation Circle
- Legacy Tours/Shalhevet

This report highlights findings from a study on the impact of participation between 2012 and 2022 in one or more of these programs on young people's lives after they completed the programs. The Holocaust Center had contact information for 213 former program participants, all of whom were invited to take part in the study. Of those, 48 former participants completed a survey about what they remembered from the program(s) they took part in and about their lives since then. Additionally, 13 former participants took part in one-on-one interviews via Zoom. Together, these data paint a picture of how their time with the Holocaust Center influenced their lives. (see Appendix, Graph 1 for the distribution of respondents by program.) While the findings from this study are not generalizable across all young people who participate in Holocaust and genocide education-related activities, the findings shed considerable insight into how young people are influenced by Holocaust and genocide education.

¹ The Holocaust Center was created in 1979 and joined Jewish Family and Children's Services in 2010.

WHAT CHANGED

Participants Were Changed

Participants repeatedly shared how their Holocaust Center experience changed them. The most common areas of change noted by young people in both surveys and interviews were that they became more empathetic, more courageous in standing up for others, better consumers of media, and more thoughtful about the world generally. For many alumni, it shifted how they understood the world.

In interviews, most participants described how taking part in the Holocaust Center programs heightened their ability to be empathetic. They spoke of being more open to people with different life experiences, views, or backgrounds. As one Manovill alumnus shared,

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The fact that Holocaust education is important for creating empathetic young people—[not only] of people in society in general and [who] experience suffering, but also different cultures, different groups of people and types of people—is really useful. And I think it is necessary for creating a population, a group of people, a nation, a society that can look at another person like ‘Oh this is cool. Like I appreciate this other person’ versus ‘Oh this person’s so different. I don’t want anything to do with them’

Participants also regularly shared feeling more comfortable standing up for their beliefs in the face of opposition after completing a Holocaust Center program. One young man who had participated in Conversation Circle and Manovill stated,

“

I feel like I’m a bit more willing to speak out sometimes, like encouraging people to vote, telling people what I see wrong. [...] I guess it’s made me more socially aware, made me want to talk to people more, learn more about people from different cultures, backgrounds, viewpoints, and just try and do my part in creating a space where people can share their ideas in a healthy way, and also, like, try to persuade people with sort of, like, unhealthy thought patterns to change their ways.

The other main area that respondents offered was increased media literacy. Past participants noted how important this skill is to them, particularly in the age of social media and the decreased prominence of traditional media outlets among young adults. Multiple people discussed how they were more critical analysts of media because they took part in their program, as this woman who had taken part in Manovill relayed,

“

I feel like the JFCS Holocaust Center helped give me a sense of media literacy. So, looking at things with a critical lens and not just doing blanket statements of, like, this is how all Mexicans [are], this is how all, Christians, or whatever it is, and really thinking a little bit more critically about the media that I watch.

Finally, many participants talked about how their experiences in these programs made them think more deeply about the world. Most young people who took part in the interviews shared that they were more critical and discerning because of the program. As one alum who had taken part in both Conversation Circle and Manovill said,

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And the more you kind of understand, like, all of these different things happening at once, and, like, how they're connected, the more you can, like, have a deeper perspective on how you think about the world.

Young People Retain Important Knowledge

Alumni of Holocaust Center programs related, in both open-ended responses on the survey and in interviews, that they retained specific knowledge from their experiences. They also shared that they found the pedagogical approaches used in the programs to have helped them develop skills that they use in their present day lives. Many of the respondents during interviews indicated that they did not enter their program with much baseline knowledge of the Holocaust and genocide, but left with a strong understanding and often (as shown below), a strong desire to keep learning in these areas.

Content and Knowledge Retained

Respondents talked about both the content and structure of the programs they took part in. Throughout all the data collected, several main recollections were common. Survey respondents and interviewees nearly unanimously relayed specific information related to the Holocaust and genocide from their time in Holocaust Center programs. The three main areas that people discussed were:

- Survivor testimony
- Knowledge of specific genocides and the Holocaust
- Use of propaganda in genocide

The evidence that these were important to past participants came from both the survey and the interviews. Graph 2 (see Appendix) tabulates commonly occurring themes from an open-ended survey question asking respondents what they remember from their time in their program. Often respondents mentioned more than one of these topics, and all survey respondents mentioned at least one of these topics.

The interviews yielded similar main themes. One young man who had been in Manovill articulated very specific details related to the Holocaust when talking about what he remembered:

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But the important part ... was starting all the way back with the Gospel of John, and moving through [to] medieval European Christianity and seeing the history of these antisemitic tropes. [These tropes] lead to a broader but important historical context to ground what ... sort of preceded the Holocaust, but also 'pre-seeded,' like laying the seeds for, the context of antisemitism that was in German history and European history. It really helped me understand the similarities and mutations that antisemitic tropes can take over time.

Past participants also retained knowledge about the ways genocides emerge and are carried out. Several people across the survey and interviews talked about recognizing the ten stages of genocide. Many others spoke about the role of propaganda specifically related to the early stages of genocide, such as this young woman who had taken part in both The Next Chapter and Manovill:

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[Among] all the different things we learned, we learned a lot about what led up to the Holocaust as well [as] the atrocities that [happened]. But also, we looked at different propaganda pieces and ... how fascism had begun and [its] roots. And unfortunately, like now, today, I'm recognizing some of those things in our own political system, [like] AI art and things like that, and how visual imagery can send messages that could be very dangerous.

Skill Development

In addition to recalling the history and specifics of the Holocaust and genocide, past participants also routinely shared that the programs—most often Manovill and the University Fellowship—provided them with the skills needed to be successful moving forward. Two main areas emerged related to skill development:

- Research and teaching skills
- Communication and critical thinking skills

Some participants talked about academic skills, such as note-taking and the organization of work. For example, one young woman who had participated in Manovill shared how the program helped her:

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And I think I also took a lot of notes. I [developed] good note-taking skills. I feel like I learned a lot of academic skills from some of those things. It was also lower pressure, like we didn't have homework or anything. But when I was taking notes, I was practicing a lot of, you know, study skills. So that was also good.

Others, such as this woman who had taken part in both Manovill and The Next Chapter, relayed how the program had helped them develop critical thinking skills:

“

But you know, getting a foundation [in understanding] the Holocaust, and then kind of turning the tables on to you, and using your critical thinking skills ... applying [them] to a different ... genocide. And then I remember in my case it was the Rwandan genocide that was my focus and [the program gave me the] confidence, to talk about something that, like, a lot of people don't know about. And I thought that was really impactful. And I think that definitely influences me to this day.

Holocaust Education Is Influential

On average, survey respondents indicated that participation had influenced three areas of their lives, with education cited the most frequently (see Appendix, Graph 3). The interview participants similarly indicated that they found participation influential; all interviewees stated that their participation impacted their choices or views, primarily with respect to decisions about education, work and career, politics, and personal behavior/values.

The survey data show some differences between alumni of the various programs, at least among those who responded. Most of these minor differences are reasonable given the slightly different age groups who participate in each program. University Fellows, for example, were somewhat more likely to say that participation influenced their education (although many young people across programs also said so), but were less likely to say participation influenced their religious practices (which makes sense given that the program focuses on professional development) or their political views. University Fellows are older than Manovill or The Next Chapter participants and may have had a more settled political identity by the time they participated.

Conversely, Manovill respondents were less likely to report that program participation influenced their ideas about their career or work, which aligns with their being in high school, a time when many young people have not yet solidified their career trajectories. The Next Chapter participants in the study were more likely to indicate that their political views were influenced, which may stem from the fact that, on average, participants are younger in that program compared to the others. The interview data offer support for these findings as well.

Educational Impact

Across respondents, education was mentioned repeatedly as something program participation influenced. Young people shared that it impacted them in multiple ways. For some, it shifted what they chose to engage with during their schooling. For example, a young man who had participated in Manovill said,

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I took a class my sophomore year [in college] about the history of North Africa, and we focused one class session on the Jewish history of North Africa, and my final paper was about the experience of Tunisian Jews during the Holocaust. ... This past semester ending in May, I took a class about the history of Jewish-Muslim relations which was very interesting. ... I would say that I've stayed as engaged as I possibly can.

A few program participants shifted their educational trajectories completely based on the experience. A young woman who had taken part in Manovill similarly related how participation had shifted her educational journey profoundly:

“

I would say, [taking part in Manovill] definitely influenced my focus on not necessarily getting a business degree. I went to a liberal arts college, a very small one, and I think being exposed to a small classroom like [I experienced in Manovill] as well as [the focus on] holistic learning, definitely inspired me to go to a very small school, and it didn't have to be a business [or] vocational school.

Personal Impact

About half of all study respondents stated that Holocaust Center program participation influenced their ideas or decisions related to work and career. As one young man who went through both The Next Chapter and Manovill stated,

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But I would say also [taking part in the programs] definitely led me to apply to work at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, which is another very meaningful experience. So, I would say that JFCS [Holocaust Center] programming definitely altered my life for the better.

What was striking was the number of young people who talked about the profound personal impact of their participation. Participants shared that the program helped them understand how large and complicated the world is by teaching them about empathy. Some participants felt that learning about the complexity of the world inspired them to be more curious about people unlike themselves.

Others described empathy in a slightly different way: being empathetic to the hardships and violence that survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides have endured without turning away from the strength of the emotions. Overall, empathy and engagement were key. An alumna of the University Fellows program shared,

“

I feel like [my] ability to empathize with, like, folks who've been through real struggles and have really hard stories. And not just me being able to empathize, but being able to teach that version, like to teach that to others, and hold space for that, and be able to really uncover the hard histories and bring that inside of my class. It was also something that really kind of informed me.

Although not as common, a few respondents did talk about how participation impacted their Jewish identity. A woman who had taken part in two programs as a teen stated,

“

I think I'll start off by saying that I felt that both Manovill and Next Chapter and the two combined really had a pretty transformational effect on my identity and my understanding of that identity [as a Jewish person].

Civic Responsibility

Many respondents reflected on the influence participation had on their views of civic responsibility. Young people took away the lesson from their Holocaust education that it's important for people to stand up in the face of intolerance, hatred, and bigotry. As one woman who was a Manovill alumna said,

“

I think the biggest thing that I remember feeling really differently about was the idea that, like, you can't expect the [government of your country] to take care of you always. [This sense] definitely added on to the values of social justice and pluralism that I already had [related to helping others].

Others talked about speaking up and encouraging others to do so as well. Some respondents shared how they have become more discerning consumers of online social media because of their experiences with Holocaust education.

Holocaust Education Leads to Lifelong Learning

Most respondents indicated they continued to learn about the Holocaust and genocide after they completed their program(s) at the Holocaust Center. More program alumni reported they were committed to learning more about the Holocaust, genocide, and antisemitism, compared to continuing to expand their knowledge of Jewish history and the Jewish people. (see Appendix, Graph 4)

Others reported on how they developed a curiosity for learning more about what they had learned during Holocaust Center programs, such as this young man who shared,

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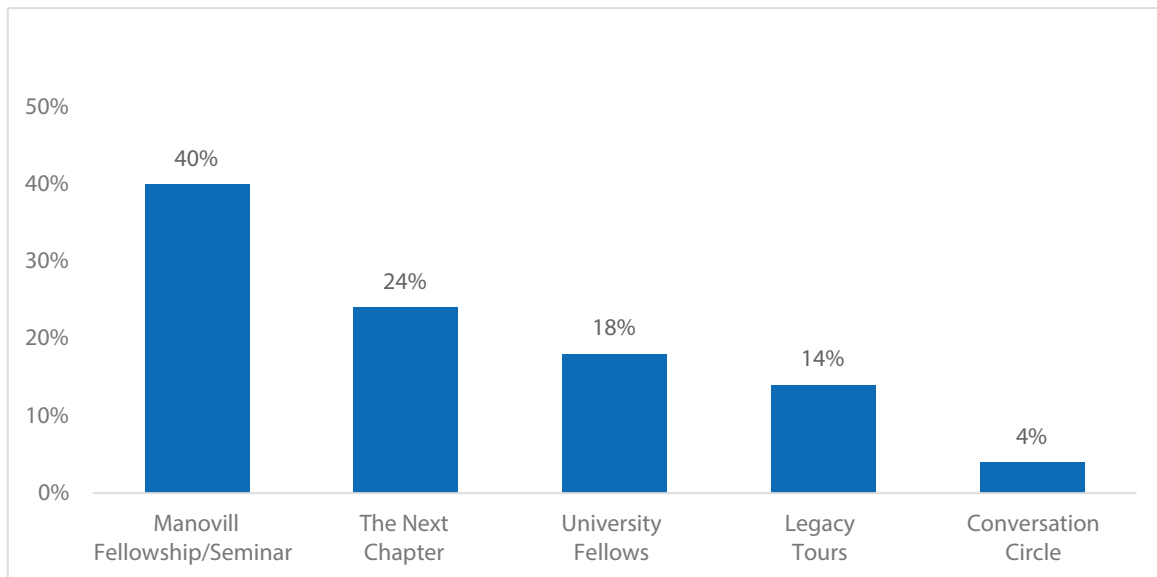
[During the Manovill program] I taught about the Bosnian genocide, and then when I was studying in Europe [during college], I had the opportunity to visit Bosnia. I was able to go to Sarajevo and ... to Srebrenica and see the graveyards and where the massacre happened and talk with survivors there. So, I feel like just [Manovill] made me ... take advantage of [opportunities to learn] even when I'm being a tourist. I'm still learning, and I'm still drawing connections back to what I learned in Manovill and in The Next Chapter.

CONCLUSION

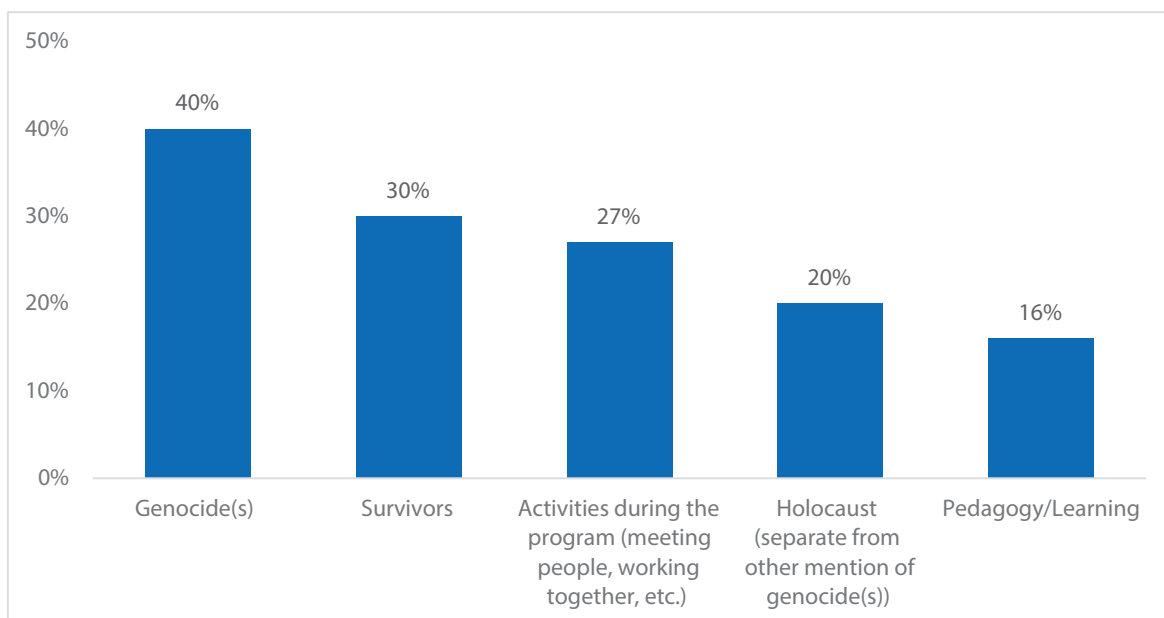
Together, the evidence from this study supports previous research showing the impact of Holocaust and genocide education on young people beyond content knowledge. The data gathered here describe in finer detail how program participants changed because of their experiences with the Holocaust Center. Young people who took part grew as individuals, and program participation was influential in their decision-making moving forward. Alumni continue to be engaged with Holocaust and genocide topics. Holocaust and genocide education was impactful for those who partook in Holocaust Center programming and continues to be so years later.

APPENDIX

GRAPH 1: Survey Respondents by Program (n=48)



GRAPH 2: Topics Most Commonly Remembered by Survey Respondents (n=30)*



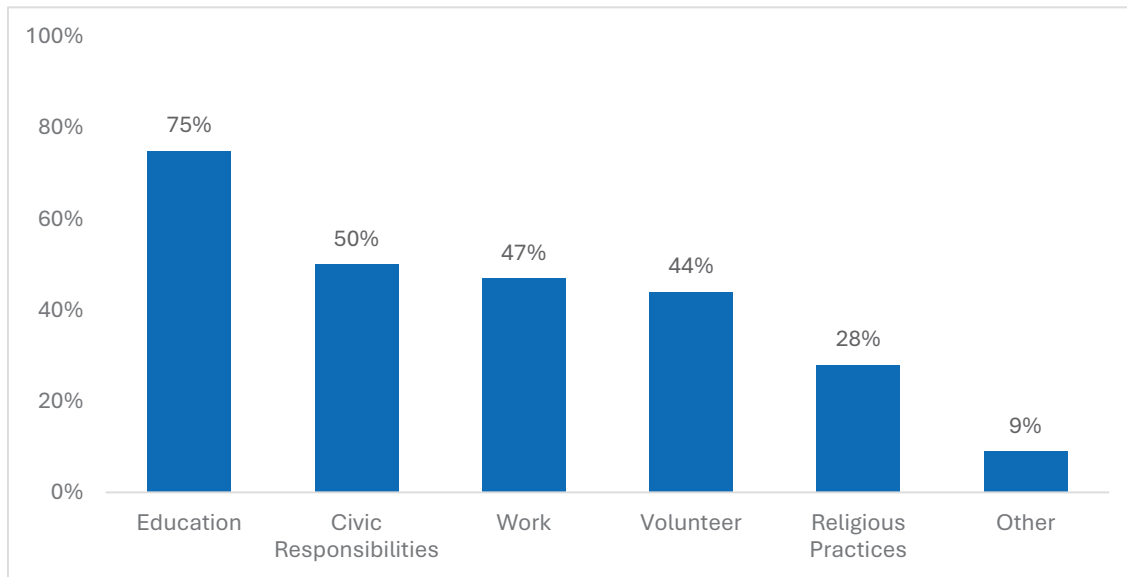
*Not all survey respondents answered all of the open-ended questions.

TABLE 1: PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION	STRUCTURE	AGES OF PARTICIPANTS	YEARS RUNNING
Manovill Fellowship/Seminar	The Manovill Fellowship/Seminar provides high school students with a unique opportunity to examine the patterns of genocide through the lens of the Holocaust and the Cambodian genocide (since 2021; previously, young people learned about patterns of genocide more generally), explore Jewish peoplehood, and analyze both historical and contemporary forms of antisemitism. Through discussions, survivor testimony, and Tauber Archives exploration, students complete a project that applies seminar themes.	Weekly meetings, as a seminar	15-18	1995-present
University Fellowship	The Pell and Manovill University Fellowships offer undergraduate and graduate students paid roles for one academic year as integral members of the Holocaust Center staff. They mentor teens, support survivors, assist with the archives, and lead educational programming. Fellows contribute to the Center's work combating antisemitism globally through education and policy initiatives.	Work schedule: 15 hours/week	18+*	2014-present
The Next Chapter	The Next Chapter was an introduction to the history of the Holocaust for 9th through 12th graders. In The Next Chapter, teens developed profound connections with Holocaust survivors. Students learned about the Holocaust through survivor testimony and heard from several different speakers over the course of the program. By learning to recognize the value in others' stories and experiences, students developed appreciation for their own story and identity while gaining moral courage and a sense of social responsibility.	Weekly meetings	15-18	2007-2021
Conversation Circle	Conversation Circle offers high school students a chance to form a deep connection with a Holocaust survivor through a series of open discussions. Featuring a member of the JFCS Holocaust Center's William J. Lowenberg Speakers Bureau, students explore personal histories, which foster deeper insights into individual identity and the lasting effects of the Holocaust.	Weekly meetings	15-18	2020-present
Legacy Tours/Shalhevet	Legacy Tours was a travel study program for multi-generational groups (teens, college students, and adults). Past itineraries included visits to museums and memorials in Berlin, Poland, and Israel; survivor testimony; study at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau; celebrations of historic and contemporary Jewish life in Poland; and learning about contemporary Israeli society.	Two-week trip	15+	2004-2012

* The University Fellowships are restricted to current undergraduate or graduate students studying in the state of California.

GRAPH 3: Areas of Influence Reported by Survey Respondents (n=48)*



* Respondents could indicate more than one area of influence.

GRAPH 4: Areas Survey Respondents Continued to Learn About (n=48)

