

## MEMORANDUM

To: Steve Kraus, Executive Director, The Alliance for Continuing Rabbinic Education (ACRE)

From: The Rosov Consulting Team

Re: Strategies to Advance the Assessment of the Outcomes of Continuing Rabbinic Education/ Phase II – Identifying Potential Shared End User Outcomes

Date: June 13<sup>th</sup> 2014

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### I. Background and Process

The second phase of Rosov Consulting’s ongoing engagement with ACRE involved the identification of common “end user” outcomes across ACRE’s member organizations. As we explained in our proposal,

“The ultimate beneficiaries of CRE (congregants, school families, and other clients of organizations for which rabbis serve as lead professionals) are invariably located a number of moves away from the CRE programs themselves. Those beneficiaries interact with and learn from rabbis at different degrees of intensity and regularity. Yet ultimately their lives are touched by CRE alumni in ways that may follow patterns that can be systematically identified.”

Rosov Consulting conducted four focus groups with three different constituencies: (i) the rabbis who participate in Continuing Rabbinic Education (CRE) programs, (ii) “providers” of CRE programs, and (iii) congregants and students – “Jews in the pews” – in settings that employ the rabbis who are beneficiaries of CRE programs.

Our focus groups asked participants to articulate desired “end-user” outcomes of CRE programs from their particular vantage point. *Providers* talked about their goals for the communities in which the rabbis (their alumni) serve, *participants* talked about their own motivations for participating in CRE programs as well as the impact they hope to have on their communities, and *end-users* described both actual and aspirational outcomes for themselves and their communities. The Rosov Consulting team then set about assessing the extent to which common themes and outcomes emerged from these discussions.

In this memo we describe our findings as well as the implications for future explorations. The findings from this phase of our work will feed directly into Phase III or our consultancy: An experiment in assessing end-user outcomes.

## II. Potential Shared Outcomes

As noted in Rosov Consulting's previous work with ACRE, the diversity of member organizations in terms of mission, program features and desired outcomes presents a challenge in identifying shared outcomes. The challenge lies in identifying end user outcomes that may apply to *all* programs, despite their differences in approach and programming. We found that in order to identify an outcome as "common" to a wide variety of ACRE programs, our team had to "zoom out" in our analysis. That is to say, the end user outcomes detailed below are broad in scope, encompassing the general features that all ACRE programs have in common. Our analysis did not cater to the specifics of any given ACRE CRE program.

That said, the focus group conversations do point to a set of overarching and unifying themes:

The conversations often moved from discussion of changes in the rabbi that will, *by extension*, affect the end users. Three shared end-user outcomes come into focus followed by three that are directed at the rabbi with secondary value to the end user.

- i. **Inspiration:** This outcome was named in all of the focus groups. The notion is that CRE programs should help rabbis inspire the people they teach, reach or serve. Skills learned (e.g. a new meditation technique, a new way of teaching text) are to be applied in the service of inspiring the laity. Inspiration, in turn, is valuable when it serves to generate a change in behavior. Thus inspiration leads to deeper understanding and engagement.
- ii. **Increased Involvement, Engagement, Interest:** The word "increase" surfaced many times throughout our conversations. In general, there is a hope that a community or an individual will experience change that can be measured in quantitative terms. Examples include attending more events, classes, or services, or actively participating in new rituals (e.g. reading Torah or leading services). Many spoke of communities that are small and are in need of attracting new participants to a variety of programs or services. End users hope that when their rabbi attends a CRE program, he/she can learn new skills that enable them to be a catalyst for communal growth.
- iii. **Connected:** Many hope to see end users become more connected to either a) the rabbi or b) the congregation. In contrast to the increased involvement described above, these connections may be less observable or measurable. This "connection" may take the form of an internal transformation in the end-user or a more subtle change in living a Jewish life, a greater interest in study, or greater commitment. End-users also speak of this dimension in terms of extending a rabbi's ability to make more meaningful connections with **specific** constituencies such as youth or congregants with special needs.

The following three outcomes are directed toward the rabbi with impact on the end-user as a by-product:

- iv. **Restoration:** There is a keen awareness among all stakeholders that rabbis are in a demanding and stressful profession. The work of congregational rabbis in particular is considered to be taxing and draining. We heard an expressed interest for the rabbi to emerge from the CRE experience refreshed, less "burnt out," and more energized overall. Rabbis who are able to achieve this state are better able to serve their congregations. There is general agreement that, while hard to describe, the impact of a refreshed rabbi on his/her congregation is palpable.
- v. **Peer Connectedness:** Many hope that a rabbi will use the opportunity of participating in a CRE program to "branch out" and meet colleagues. We heard stakeholders ascribe value to the exchange of ideas and

experiences, collaborative problem solving and reducing the inevitable isolation of a rabbi who operates in a narrow sphere. When a rabbi is more “in touch” with peers s/he is also more aware of the challenges that face the Jewish world, and can better understand the needs of his/her congregation within the context of the broader Jewish community.

- vi. **Knowledge:** End users hope that their rabbis who participate in CRE programs will emerge with newfound knowledge. Few spoke about their rabbi gaining knowledge of text or studying a volume of Talmud. Rather, there was a strong feeling that rabbis should develop knowledge in areas that are key to engaging their communities: Interpersonal relationships, teaching skills, and spiritual “knowledge.”

### III. Differences Between Groups

Despite some of the common outcomes noted above, there were some key differences that emerged between the focus groups. Providers, participants, and end users were not always on the “same page” about what they hoped would be the outcomes of CRE programs.

- i. *Learning & Renewal vs. Networking:* Rabbis and end users are slightly more concerned with the learning and renewal that comes from direct engagement with peers while program providers see these outcomes as a consequence of the program content and delivery. (We know from our work with providers that many of them have active alumni communities and there may simply be a tacit assumption that peer engagement is an ongoing and present dimension of all CRE.) The rabbis and end users, on the other hand, explicitly name networking and connecting with peers as a vehicle for learning and revitalization, irrespective of the program they attend.
- ii. *Enacting a Vision vs. Refuge:* Overall, providers of CRE design programs for rabbis that are deeply rooted in a specific vision for a thriving Jewish community. Rabbis and end users, however, do not necessarily appreciate, or pursue these programs out of a sense of idealism. Rather, these programs are a “refuge” from the hectic world of Jewish professional life.

Overall, not everyone is focused on end users. Some rabbis spoke about their participation in CRE programs for their own personal and professional fulfillment rather than to impact “end users”. Similarly, some of ACRE’s member organizations do not design and operate CRE programs with the “end user” in mind.

### IV. Methodological challenges

A number of methodological challenges emerged throughout our data collection. While these findings do not invalidate our learnings, they are nonetheless important to mention:

- i. **Generalizability:** Our findings are based on a limited number of focus groups, each of which included 6-8 participants. While our team was able to glean some important insights and themes from these discussions, it would be a stretch to generalize these across all of ACRE. In addition, because of the small number of focus groups held (4), it was impossible to build a sample that is representative of all of ACRE’s member groups.
- ii. **Reliability:** In the course of our research, we made every effort to diversify our sample as much as possible. We asked the ACRE member organizations that participated in Phase I of this project to send out a generalized request to their alumni. ACRE’s Executive Director similarly sent out a generalized request. It is our sense, however, that end-users who participated in our focus groups were close enough to their rabbis (as active synagogue volunteers, executive or rabbinic search committee members or long time

students) to be aware of the continuing education opportunities of which their rabbis had availed themselves and were more closely attuned to the resulting observable impact. This may be quite unlike the general population who may be less aware of the programs their rabbis attend.

## V. Implications

Our work thus far has surfaced a number of fascinating implications for ACRE and its member groups:

1. **Internal vs. External Goals:** Some programs are focused on nourishing the rabbi's heart and mind. These goals are harder to measure and may only be observable by those positioned closer to the rabbi in his/her daily work. The distal impact on the end-user is even harder to measure. Other programs focus on skill building and behavioral change providing rabbis with tools that will increase their effectiveness in their roles. These goals lend themselves more readily to observable measures and may be riper for assessing their impact on end users. Our work in Phase 3 with *Rabbis Without Borders* and the *Institute for Jewish Spirituality* may provide an interesting opportunity to consider the possibilities for measuring end-user outcomes at both ends of this spectrum.
2. **Quantitative Measurement:** Our focus groups have highlighted a quantitative dimension to measuring impact. It is possible that as a consequence of CRE participation, rabbis might be reaching more people (i.e. attracting larger numbers to classes, programs and services). One of the participants called this "greater audience." Rabbis and CRE providers could identify the relevant contexts and apply the measures in a pre and post fashion.
3. **"Reach" of CRE:** End users are not always aware of CRE programs that their rabbis attend. While they may be able to observe changes in their rabbi, this does not necessarily indicate that they are aware that these changes were due to CRE. We have become keenly aware of the fact that only those most closely connected to the rabbi will probably be able to do so. ACRE and its member organizations may now be highly focused on the end user, however the relationship does not work both ways.
4. **Keeping the Rabbi Fresh:** One of our most intriguing findings is the restorative quality of CRE programs. Providers did not mention this as a priority, while end users and rabbis did. While there is a remedial/restorative dimension to CRE that is of great value, it is challenging to observe in the form of a transformative act or application. While keeping the rabbi "fresh" and up to date may thus appear to be minimalistic, it is definitely no small matter and requires the attention of providers, participants and end users.

As detailed above, our work thus far has uncovered a number of key themes and potential commonalities that cut across ACRE's member groups. These findings are important, as they move ACRE towards a common mode of assessment and goals. In light of the great diversity of ACRE affiliates we suggest that a broader group of providers consider these findings' applicability to their own programs.

Using this framework as a starting point, our next steps will be to translate some of these key themes into the creation of an "end user" instrument that will be fielded in synagogues associated with a select group of alumni of two ACRE programs.