



Creating Community Connections through a Joint Venture with a Trade Association:
A Six-Year Retrospective of What We've Learned

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In the current climate of government funding cuts and competition to attract a declining population of traditional students, universities are embracing a philosophy of connecting the university to the community. Fashion merchandising programs that reside within Family and Consumer Sciences departments have historically maintained links with their communities. FCS adopted a mission of promoting the well being of individuals, families and communities, so embedding FCS programs within their communities proved to be a philosophy ahead of its time. For fashion merchandising programs, internships were a logical tool for creating these community connections and complying with university mandates.

There has also been a not-so-subtle shift in the focus of a university education. Again, in the current economy, students are looking for an education that directly translates into a career. Students shopping for a university typically ask four questions: how quickly can I complete my degree, do you require an internship, what is the job market for this degree, and how much money will I make? In an effort to expand career opportunities for students, in 2006 we embarked on a joint venture with The National Needlearts Association to provide internships in the needlearts industry.

The National Needlearts Association (TNNA) is a trade association that represents retailers, designers, manufacturers, and publishers of fine needleart products and supplies. In 2004, the needlearts industry represented an \$8.5 billion market. Most fashion merchandising students are not even aware of the career possibilities within this market. Furthermore, TNNA recognized that the younger demographic was not well represented in its membership. Therefore, a joint venture with a university, designed to provide internships for students, provided an exciting opportunity for all involved. In the summer of 2006, the Pathways into Professional Needlearts (PiPN) program was launched.

The PiPN program was developed through a partnership among TNNA, our university, and an independent publicist who contracted with TNNA. TNNA members were canvassed for volunteers to host interns for an eight-week internship. While the TNNA members expressed enthusiasm about the program, there was concern about the students' competencies in the needlearts. Our university faculty developed an intensive pre-internship program that focused on the history, social significance, and techniques of each of the needlearts represented by TNNA. The students also attended one of the bi-annual trade shows sponsored by TNNA. All potential

interns were required to complete the class, but the class was also available to other students as an elective. The university professors worked closely with the publicist and TNNA sponsors to match the interns with host companies. The professors supervised the interns.

In 2006 twenty-two students completed the course, and ten interns served with host companies across the United States. The interns found that this new industry (to them) offered networking, nurturing and potential careers that the students had never imagined. Six of the ten interns maintained their connections into the following year with several continuing their work into the school year. The TNNA host companies expressed their delight with the students with statements such as, "We have nothing but wonderful things to say."

Over the six years of the program, ninety-two students enrolled in the pre-internship class, and forty-one students completed PiPN internships. Those internships were spread across North and South America and England. In the summer of 2012, TNNA officially cancelled the PiPN program, and the university cancelled the pre-internship class for low enrollment. So, what happened, and what can we learn from this experience? The numbers tell only part of the story.

TNNA budgeted approximately \$30,000 a year for the PiPN program, so the organization was interested in maximizing the number of students in the program. The majority of the funding was used to pay the salary of the publicist. Therefore, she began recruiting students from other universities, supervising those interns herself and waiving their requirement of taking the pre-internship class. Enrollment in the pre-internship class dropped, and, without the class, some students arrived at their internship sites with little or no needlearts skills.

Despite the problems, TNNA, the fashion merchandising program, and the university received many benefits from the PiPN program. National and community exposure was one of the biggest benefits. The program was featured in *Vogue Knitting*, on PBS, in the local newspaper, and *Interweave Press*. The students gained valuable industry experience and several currently enjoy careers in the needlearts industry. After a change in leadership, we are currently exploring how we might connect again with TNNA and re-launch a new PiPN program.

What do we recommend to others seeking to establish a similar venture? Direct communication and focus are important keys to success. Discussions of mutually agreed upon goals and management systems are central to profitable community connections. We are grateful for this experience, and, after six years, we have a lot to share.